THE CONTRIBUTION OF D*IE FREIEN GEMEINDEN TO SCIENCES, ARTS AND LETTERS IN WISCONSIN

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In the record of Wisconsin’s contribution to sciences, arts and letters, the part of a small group of nearly forgotten liberals deserves recognition. No group of pioneers in the 1850 to 1880 period of state history was more devoted to the encouragement of the intellectual life than were die Freien Gemeinden, the Free Congregations, in the German–American settlements. In the midst of a rugged physical struggle against the hardships of pioneer life, they never lost sight of the need to nourish the mind as well as the body; their ideal was to promote a continuous search for more and more knowledge and to use that knowledge for the general welfare.

These forgotten humanists of 1850–80 were devoted to the principle expressed later by the Regents of the University of Wisconsin in their 1894 report:

Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere, we believe that the great State University of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found. (II, 110.)

Die Freien Gemeinden were minority groups in the German–American settlements which were established in Wisconsin from 1848 to 1880: the majority of the German immigrants were orthodox Lutherans or Catholics who did not approve of the Free Congregations. The history of these Free Congregations had begun in Germany between 1840 and 1844, when groups within both Protestant and Catholic churches had declared their independence from orthodoxy in church dogma and authoritarianism in church government. It was the victory of the conservative forces after the failure of the German Revolution of 1848 which influenced many members of die Freien Gemeinden to join the immigration of Germans to the United States.

During the next twenty-five or thirty years after the first migration of 1848, societies of die Freien Gemeinden were found in many German settlements from New York to San Francisco, and subscription lists published in their monthly magazine, Blätter für

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freies religiöses Leben, show individual members as far south as Texas. The strongest gemeinden were those established in Philadelphia, St. Louis, Sauk City, Milwaukee, and San Francisco, but smaller ones existed for a time in communities in Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and Minnesota. Wisconsin had 32 in 1852, according to Eduard Schröter, who traveled about the state giving lectures on the principles of the Free Congregations and organizing the smaller groups. But by 1862, he was lamenting the decrease in membership and the apathy within the groups (I, Dec., 1862, 91). Today the only active groups in Wisconsin, and perhaps in the United States, are Sauk City and Milwaukee.

Although the Free Congregations have been fading away in Wisconsin and in the rest of the United States, they made a contribution to the intellectual life of the period in which they were active forces in some of the German-American settlements. Their contributions of a lively interest in nineteenth century science, in encouragement of music, debate, and drama, in the study of philosophy, history, and literature deserve recognition.

It is the purpose of this paper to present evidence of the contribution of die Freien Gemeinden to the Wisconsin philosophy of untrammeled inquiry in the search for truth and to the encouragement of the sciences, arts and letters in the 1850–1880 period in the history of Wisconsin. The examples that follow come from the constitutions of these societies, from their statements of belief, and from the content of their monthly magazine, Blätter für freies religiöses Leben, published from 1856 to 1876.

The constitutions of the two surviving Free Congregations of Wisconsin contain many phrases affirming the intellectual freedom of the individual, the importance of continuous search for truth through the study of nature and history, the belief that knowledge of truth grows from age to age, and the ideal that increasing knowledge should be used to make the world a better place for human beings.

Sauk City Free Congregation, in its constitution adopted in 1853, expresses its belief in freedom of thought for the individual member:  

There shall be no doctrine formally stated and authoritatively proclaimed or laid down as by a church ... The object of this organization is, therefore, not the subjection of man to extraneous authority of one person or one book for the purpose of rendering him blest, but on the contrary, the intellectual and moral freedom of man, his independence and individuality in thinking, deciding, and acting ... We have no doctrines or creeds established for all time, but instead fundamental principles and views of life which are subject to continual reclarification and examination. (IV)

1In all quotations which follow the italics are mine and are intended to call attention to the emphasis upon the right of free inquiry, the continuous search for truth, and the tentative character of all statements of belief.
The Milwaukee Constitution emphasizes the importance of education and the use of science to make a better world:

Conscious of the limitations of the human mind and aware of our dependence upon forces known and unknown amid which our brief lives are spent, we seek nevertheless through education and dissemination of the truths of science to dispel ignorance and mysticism and destroy superstitions.

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to establish through observation and experience a system of philosophy wide as the world and embracing all men, which will attempt to ascertain man’s relation to the universal forces about him and place him in harmony with such forces mentally and physically.

Through knowledge of his common origin, his common end, and a realization of his common needs and tasks, to which we subscribe, man will eventually be able to make of this earth, which is his home, a place where the good and true and beautiful will survive. (III)

In 1856, Friedrich Schüinemann-Pott, speaker of the Philadelphia Gemeinde and editor of the Blätter ..., wrote an article to answer the question “What do the Freie Gemeinde of Philadelphia believe?” After stating that they do not tie themselves to a creed, he says:

We say that the Freie Gemeinde wishes the rule of reason or rests upon the unconditional freedom of the human spirit revealing itself in moral acts, or it aspires toward the universal development of human beings in the way of knowledge and the moral life ....

But to answer the requests for a Freie Gemeinde creed, with the understanding that no one is bound by it for all time and that it is a gradually developing belief, I will set down the following:

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We do not wish to form a new sect but to reconcile the unhappy conflict of men about the forms of religion by promoting reasonable beliefs.

In this sense all religions of past and present appear to us as a part of the spiritual development of mankind.

For us religion consists in the reasonable knowledge of the world and its laws, especially the knowledge of the earth and of developing human nature and the consistent application of this knowledge upon the form of our own life and society’s, or in other words the essence of all truth, justice, and love.

We do not inclose the content of our religion in any narrowing limiting creed or hold any external customs, but consider the entire life itself in its manifold evidences an expression of moral and reasonable world view.

We have no holy book, no holy places, holy times, holy customs, no holy priesthood. Instead of a holy book, nature and history; instead of holy places the entire and unified world, instead of holy times, the whole life of humanity from the beginning to the end; instead of holy customs every good and beautiful thing born of perception ...; instead of privileged priesthood there is with us the independence of all members with equal rights, who choose by their own free judgment their speakers, teachers, and all officers.
When the Freie Gemeinde of Plymouth, Wisconsin, reorganized in 1870 after a period of inactivity, they summarized their philosophy of life in a statement which shows the influence of nineteenth century science and rationalism:

We place reason above revelation; in place of faith, free search for knowledge; in place of two world, one (of whose existence we are certain); in place of miracle, natural law; in place of God's providence, man's own providence; in place of predestination, fate; in place of man torn between body and soul, the unified, harmonious man; in place of trust in God, self-confidence; in place of humility, the consciousness of human dignity; in place of abstinence, the moderate use of pleasure; in place of desire for reward, the love of good for its own sake; in place of heaven on the other side, heaven on this side (in the hearts, homes, the societies, the states) among the people; in place of values on the other side, values on this side; in place of inexplicable secrets (mysteries), unsolved problems; in place of the Bible, the book of nature and history; in place of the pulpit, the speaker's platform; in place of the preacher, the speaker; in place of supernatural salvation of the soul, the natural education of the spirit and heart; in place of prescribed ritual, free customs; in place of the Christian school, the free Humanistic school. We strive for welfare, education, freedom for all without distinction in religion, in race, in nation, in rank, in sex.

Our religion is free Humanism, for it has its origin in man, including his development and continuing education through humanity, and consists essentially in the perception of and reverence for humanity.

This is our present general rule and plumb-line. But there are no irrevocable conclusions of faith. We can make for our thought and life in the future better rules and plumb-lines as it may be possible to do. Each age is its own law-giver.

The above statements show that in the nineteenth century conflict between fundamentalist religion and science, die Freien Gemeinden supported the new science. Further evidence of the Free Congregations' interest in science is contained in the list of the topics for lectures given at the meetings of the Sauk County Free Congregation and in the contents of the monthly magazine Blätter für religiöses Leben.

Mrs. Clara Runge lists among the lecture topics the following: "Bacteria, their Relation to Agriculture"; two lectures by the famous University of Wisconsin scientist, Max Otto, "Darwinism," and "Mentality of the Higher Apes"; lectures on such scientists as Kepler, Copernicus, Galileo, and Alexander Humboldt (IX, 20–26).


The emphasis upon the evolution of the universe and of man in the lectures and the magazine articles is consistent with the statements of belief in the book of nature and history as the source of authority and in the evolution of man’s knowledge about his environment, which are asserted in the constitutions of Sauk County and Milwaukee and the statement of principles by Plymouth.

In the Blätter . . . one finds also excerpts from new books on science of that period: M. J. Schleiden’s Plants and Their Life; Hudson Tuttle’s History of the Laws of Creation; a chapter, “People of the Amazon,” from Humboldt’s Journey in the Region of the Equator; the chapter “Fossils,” from Bernard von Cotta’s Geology. There are two articles by Alexander Humboldt on the study of nature: “The Influence of Knowledge of Nature upon the Enjoyment of Nature,” and “The Importance of the Study of Nature for the Culture and Life of the People.”

Scientific interest extended into the study of language; in the issue of January 1870, the Blätter . . . carried an article on “A Few Differences Between the Chinese Language and the European Languages.”

Examples such as these are part of the evidence that the Free Congregations in Wisconsin encouraged the spirit of continuous search for more and more truth about the nature of the world and man’s relation to it.

In the Blätter . . . and in their gemeinden activities die Freien Gemeinden did not neglect arts and letters. They included articles upon philosophy and literature, such as “Zur Erinnerung an Lessing,” “Talents and Innate Ideas,” “Difference Between Traditional and Scientific Ideas,” “Greeks and Barbarians,” “Pantheism and Our World Philosophy,” “The Faust Legend.” Mrs. Runge’s list of lectures at Sauk City includes “The Grimm Brothers,” “Emerson the Idealist,” “Koerner the Poet,” “Tolstoi,” “Schiller’s Life and Works,” “Goethe’s Faust,” “Voltaire,” “Anatole France” (IX, 20–26). Eduard Schröter in his reminiscences speaks of working on lectures for Fichte for the meetings of his congregation (I, Aug. 1862, 21–24).

A typical gemeinde participated in singing societies: men’s, women’s, and mixed choruses rehearsed regularly and gave concerts. Milwaukee still continues its musical activities, as the announcements in its monthly magazine, Voice of Freedom, show. In 1962 Milwaukee sent a chorus to the International Song Festival in Germany.
In addition to musical organizations, dramatic performances and evenings of declamation and debate encouraged the speech arts in any *gemeinde* large enough to manage such a program. Although Sauk City is now too small to keep up such activities, the scenery still stored in the balcony of their hall testifies to their former interest in drama. Like the Turner societies, the Free Congregations were eager to keep alive their heritage of German literature and music, and considered the education of the next generation an important responsibility. (VI, 59–71).

The interest of the members in the world of letters was stimulated by their libraries. Even so small a society as Bostwick Valley established a little library (VI, 67). The reports of a *gemeinde* to the National Association always included the number of books in the library along with a list of musical and literary activities carried on (VI, 59–71). Milwaukee and Sauk City still hold typical *gemeinde* libraries containing the works of great German writers, histories of Germany and of the United States, volumes on the science of the mid-nineteenth century, encyclopedias, dictionaries, and, of course, many books and pamphlets on the principles of Free Religion and Humanism.²

The membership of the Free Congregations was a group interested in the life of the intellect. Some were professional people, some were prosperous merchants, some were skilled artisans. They were all people of independent minds. When they settled in Wisconsin, even those who took up land and had to become pioneer farmers in order to make a living in their new home, continued their interest in intellectual activities. Eduard Schröter tells of his visit in the farm home of Herr Collip on “a half-island on Silver Lake, near Portage.” Collip had come to “this lonely island before the Forty-eighers and in the roughness of the wilderness had made his dwelling a little temple of culture. In his study he had the works of Lessing, Hegel, and Schiller” (I, Nov. 1868, 71–72).

In Schröter’s own case, there was a powerful conflict between the intellectual life and the need to keep up a little farm to supplement the salary of only $150 per year as speaker at Sauk City. At one time he was preparing a lecture on Fichte for the regular meeting of the congregation but was much aware of the fact that the corn needed hoeing. The conflict between the two duties oppressed his spirits, but after thinking it over, he decided that the more important duty was to be well-prepared for his lecture. “I remained with Fichte,” he tells us (I, Aug., 1862, 21–24).

²The Milwaukee *Freie Gemeinde* published a catalogue of its library in March, 1945. The writer of this paper has had opportunity to work in the library of the Free Congregation at Sauk City, which is not catalogued, and to make a partial bibliography of the books on the history of *die Freien Gemeinden* in Germany and in the United States.
These two pictures of the scholar-farmer are typical of the Freien Gemeinden members, who made a place in their busy pioneer lives for intellectual growth and for enjoyment of literature and music.

No one can make the claim the die Freien Gemeinden were a major influence upon the history of Wisconsin’s contribution to sciences, arts and letters. But as a minority group who valued the cultivation of the intellectual life and sought to free religion from all that was inconsistent with developing knowledge in science and history, these forgotten humanists deserve recognition. No one who reads their records of beliefs and activities can deny that they were a part of those who encouraged the untrammeled search for truth and stimulated the study of sciences, arts and letters in the state of Wisconsin.

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