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### **Infidels, Ethnicity, and Womanhood: Women in the German-American Freethinker-Movement**

Milwaukee, 1853: Eduard Schröter, speaker of the Free Congregation of the city, is about to lose his weekly paper *Der Humanist* to Moritz Schöffler, owner of the *Wisconsin Banner*. Schöffler, who is the principal stockholder in the *Humanist*, offers Schröter a deal. If Schröter refrains from attacking the Democratic Party and commenting on political issues in his paper, Schöffler will hand over his stocks to him. If not, he shall pull out his money and deny Schröter access to his printing presses on which both papers are produced. Schröter is broke and frustrated—and saved by the local *Humanistischer Frauenverein* (Humanistic Ladies Club), which is able to raise enough money for Schröter to buy out Schöffler and purchase his own printing press.<sup>1</sup> The anecdote illustrates key functions of women's club activities throughout the nineteenth century: fundraising and providing financial aid to those in need. However, it also demonstrates that female support became political acts capable of tilting the balance of power from one side to another. Female organizations had power. But women rarely had the opportunity to take part in the activities of their husbands, fathers, or brothers.

Countless societies, clubs, fraternities, and social and professional organizations existed in German-American communities throughout the nineteenth century. Nearly all of them practiced a rigid gender division. Societies were open either to males or females. Even in so-called "progressive" organizations like the Turner societies women were denied full membership rights until the early twentieth century. In the United States the women's movement had been closely tied to Christian religiosity. The Great Awakening of the eighteenth century, Temperance- and Abolitionist-movements have previously been described as phases of great female activity. Especially in church circles women found a place where they could voice their concerns, express their interests, and establish networks.<sup>2</sup> But what about women who rejected the established churches and claimed Christian religion to be morally corrupt? The large American female organizations rarely offered German immigrant women reason to join. Besides the language barrier the Temperance movement, for example, went against their core cultural values. The production of beer and the consumption of alcohol were key elements in German culture that provided for income as well as collective identity. The strong ties to the Anglo-American Protestant tradition further turned away many German Freethinking, Catholic, or Jewish immigrant women.

Therefore, German-American women established their own circles that neither were of Anglo-Saxon origin nor believed in traditional Protestant values.

The German-American Free Congregations, later known as Freethinker-Societies, were gateways for women on their way to equality. In contrast to most other German-American societies of the time, Free Congregations felt the necessity for female participation and granted women equal access to all their resources. Free Congregations, eyed with much suspicion and fiercely attacked by the established churches for the promotion of secularization, and unmoral and dangerous ideologies, followed a reform program that did not define social morality in religious terms. As one of the most liberal societies among the wide range of German-American organizations in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Free Congregations proposed a wide range of political and social reforms. Along with their attacks on religion they recommended a new social order in which women were to play a significant role. This article explores the role of women in the German-American Freethinker-movement. It demonstrates the principles of equality with regard to membership and examines why and how this was implemented.

### Roots of the Freethinker-Movement in Germany

Today the Freethinker-movement is associated with strong anti-clerical positions and clear secularist standpoints. The roots of the German-American Freethinker-movement, however, lie deep within the German Protestant and German Catholic Churches. Under the rule of the Prussian king Friedrich Wilhelm III rationalism was well rooted in the theological faculties of the universities.<sup>3</sup> Rationalist views had been greatly accepted within the academic world of the universities since the Enlightenment. Nonetheless, in 1840, after his son Friedrich Wilhelm IV inherited the throne, conservative circles won dominance within the state and church and banned the pluralism that had prevailed before. The new king appointed Christian conservative advisors into office who shared his firm pietistic views. Consequently a very strong alliance between state and church was born, one in which Protestant religious values had a powerful impact on state affairs.

The liberal wing of the Protestant church, afraid of an infringement upon past liberties, became increasingly outspoken against the new policies. Their aim to reinforce the position of rationalism and increase democratic structures within the church systems seemed to crumble before their eyes. Instead of discussions and debates that might lead to fruitful compromises and inner reform, church authorities soon directed oppressive measures against their critics. Expulsions from office or excommunication were common means to silence the opposition. Contrary to expectations, these suppressive actions did not intimidate rationalists; rather they aided the popularization of a growing opposition movement.<sup>4</sup>

In 1841 Leberecht Uhlich and Eduard Baltzer organized dissident Protestant ministers into a new organization called the "Society of Protestant Friends," or more commonly known as the "Friends of Light" (*Lichtfreunde*). Individual societies were called "Free Congregations." By 1844 a similar movement within the Catholic Church emerged under the leadership of Johannes Ronge, who founded the rationalistic "German-Catholic Church" (*Deutsch-Katholische Kirche*). Most new congregations were firmly based on Christianity. But they rejected all teachings that opposed the

results of natural sciences such as the Trinity of God, the concept of original sin, or a belief in miracles. Within the next few years an even more radical group emerged and founded the "Religion of Humanity," which was based on the doctrines of Strauss, Hegel and Feuerbach. While Free Congregations and the German-Catholic Church remained close to Christian rationalism, the "Religion of Humanity" broke with the Christian tradition completely and developed into purely secular associations.

The dissent movement grew rapidly and was supported in particular by members of the urban middle-class, who became increasingly aware of their unsatisfactory social and political conditions. Members of the Free Congregations and the German Catholic Church supported the political ideas of the *Vormärz* opposition movement. Prior to and during the Revolution of 1848 they regularly offered their podiums to revolutionary speakers. The popularity of many leaders of the religious dissent movement made them natural candidates for leading political positions. Records show that in some places there was a considerable overlap of the leadership in local democratic societies and the Free Congregations. In Nordhausen, for example, the governing body of the *Demokratischer Bürgerverein* was identical to the leadership of the local Free Congregation.<sup>5</sup> In Marburg Karl Bayrholfer was not only speaker of the Free Congregation but also chair of the *Demokratischer-Sozialistischer Verein*.<sup>6</sup> A number of prominent forty-eighters such as Friedrich Hecker and Gustav von Struwe were members of the German-Catholic movement in Frankfurt, thus revealing the close ties between religious and political reform movements.

The German dissent movement also attracted a large number of women to its cause. Sylvia Paletschek states that approximately 40 percent of the entire membership was female. According to her study, women's emancipation was part of the political and religious goals of the movement and, therefore, naturally attracted many women.<sup>7</sup> Female members played an active part in Free Congregations; their involvement ranged from the establishment of kindergartens and schools to fundraising activities, and the organization of most social functions for the congregations.<sup>8</sup> But female public activity was not limited to Free Congregations. Before and during the Revolution of 1848 women organized themselves in numerous organizations and clubs. Women's newspapers, female societies for the liberation of the Fatherland, and for educational or social purposes all started in Germany around 1848.<sup>9</sup>

The lost revolution left many hopes unanswered. Because of their support of the uprising, members of the Free- and German-Catholic movements became victims of the monarchical reaction that lashed out against everyone who was suspected of collaboration. The measures directed at suspected revolutionists included severe civil restrictions that pushed ministers and leading members of the congregations to the brink of their economic and political ruin. Authorities closed many institutions that had been founded by various female organizations, thus turning the clock back to pre-*Vormärz*-times. Many members left their homes and immigrated to the United States in the early 1850s. Among those who departed were several experienced leaders of former Free-Congregations, such as Eduard Schröter and Friedrich Schünemann-Pott and their wives. All of them would prove instrumental in shaping the German-American movement in many ways.

The first Free Congregations were founded on the East Coast by Gustav Grahll and Eduard Schröter in New York, Boston, New Haven, and Philadelphia. But with the general expansion of German migration to the Midwest a large number of

congregations were soon founded in Wisconsin, Missouri, and Minnesota. In 1852 Wisconsin counted over thirty Free Congregations throughout the state.

### **Principles of the Free Congregations**

Due to their traumatic experience at home in pre- and post-revolutionary German states, German-American members of Free Congregations demanded a strict separation of church and state. They were convinced that the firm grip of the churches had clouded people's minds with myths and religious dogmas, thus causing their inability to judge the highly importance of religious, social, and political reforms. The failure of the revolution therefore was blamed on poor education levels, and ignorance of the masses. In their minds only a comprehensive education could liberate people from their religious ignorance and superstition and open the way to a democratic society. Social and political changes could only occur in a society that left all spiritual matters solely to the conscience of the individual. The strong pietistic influence, nativism, racism, and slavery German immigrants encountered after their arrival in the United States immediately became targets for their criticism and activism.

Due to its small membership the movement encompassed many forms of rationalistic belief. In the United States German rationalists did not divide into Protestant or Catholic camps, but instead completely merged into one movement. Individual member societies became known as Free Congregations. In the absence of a binding dogma the group welcomed people of various forms of rationalistic belief, ranging from being truly antireligious to maintaining a private faith in God. The primary goal for the newly founded German-American Free Congregations was to improve the individual and society in material, intellectual, and moral aspects. To achieve their end, members believed that access to education and schooling about the world would guarantee a more secure framework for making reasonable judgments. Consequently congregations focused their attention mainly on educational work.

In contrast to a strict hierarchical order, Free Congregations modeled their structure after the early Christian church. Members voted for their speakers (ministers), the president, and the other officers on the board who were responsible for all decisions regarding the stability and growth of the congregation. Christian religious rituals mostly were abandoned and replaced with secular forms of sociability. Congregations offered regular meetings jointly for men and women, lectures given by educated individuals, and debates on topics in history, the natural sciences, philosophy, art, and music. Furthermore, Free Congregations became champions in the founding of denominationally free schools for children and adults that emphasized a sound scientific education in areas such as math, geography, nature studies (e. g. biology), literature, music, and languages. Additional efforts to increase the overall educational level in their communities included the support of libraries, reading societies, and public lectures. Their strong anti-clerical stand was translated into very concrete political demands. Among them were the rejection of prayers in Congress and public meetings, removal of the Bible from courts and schools where it was used as teaching material, a ban on ministers and priests serving soldiers in the army, the abolition of

tax-breaks for churches, and that all people would be accepted as witnesses in court proceedings without regard to their religious beliefs.

The first years were marked by financial crisis and a great fluctuation in both membership and leadership. The outbreak of the Civil War put additional pressures on the small congregations. However, the postwar years saw major changes that aided the growth of the movement. Recent advances sparked intense popular interest in sciences after the war. Major scientific books in the field such as Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, although already published in the 1850s, rose to public attention in the United States. In Germany the great century of scientific discoveries and technical advancements led by Justus Liebig or Jacob Moleschott had begun. Ernst Haeckel, the German Darwin, and Ludwig Büchner, brother of the dramatist Georg Büchner, and a scientist, became widely known. These men developed new methods that gave birth to empirical sciences. Progress in medicine as well as new archaeological finds, such as Schliemann's discovery of Troy in 1870, paved the way for an increasingly materialistic view of the world. Free Congregations that had questioned traditional religious beliefs grew larger. Furthermore, the negative effects of the Industrial Revolution, such as overpopulated cities, poverty, health problems related to the workplace, poor housing, and unemployment sparked intense social debates. Thus in the 1870s Free Congregations shifted their attention from moral and philosophical topics to scientific, societal, and political issues. This new focus was coupled with a change from their traditional rational theology to Materialism.

### **Women in Free Congregations and Freethinker Societies**

To explore women's roles in Free Congregations, we shall examine various functions that were available to them as members, officers, teachers, or speakers, to determine if women were granted access to these roles and in what ways they participated in the congregations. To grasp the full meaning of the following statistics, one must take into account the status quo of the nineteenth century: neither in German-American Turner societies, nor in most singing societies, countless fraternal organizations, or secret societies were women allowed to hold membership. German-American Free Congregations were an exception. Here women held their place alongside their husbands, fathers, or brothers. Membership records show that women were allowed to become full members with equal rights to vote, and duties to pay dues.<sup>10</sup> Although the early records are very spotty, we find traces of other supporting evidence. In 1857, for example, Eduard Schröter, speaker of the Sauk City Free Congregation, declared publicly in one of his lectures that women were equal to men. The records of the Free Congregation in Philadelphia for 1860 reveal that among the 258 members 27 were female.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Carl Lüdeking, speaker of the Free Congregation of North St. Louis, held a lecture in September 1867 for the dedication of a newly built hall, in which he compared the *Freimänner-Vereine* (Society of Free Men), another liberal group, with the Free Congregations. As one of the major differences between the two groups he noted that females have a voice in the Free Congregations, whereas they did not in the Society of Free Men.<sup>12</sup> Also in 1867, Paragraph two of the constitution of the Milwaukee Free Congregation clearly stated that everybody over eighteen years of age, regardless of gender, could join the society.<sup>13</sup> And when the Indianapolis Freethinker Society reorganized in 1875, the by-laws stated that all

persons of indisputable character were able to become members.<sup>14</sup> Paragraph two of the by-laws passed at the national Philadelphia convention also specified equal rights for men and women within the societies.<sup>15</sup> And at the fourth national convention of the *Bund der Deutschen Freien Gemeinden von Nord-Amerika* in 1876, resolutions accepted included a demand that the right to vote in the United States should be granted to everyone regardless of their race, skin color, or sex.<sup>16</sup>

The fact that Free Congregations welcomed women into their organizations as equal members therefore is well established. However, it should not come as a surprise, since this feature was "imported" from Germany. A number of Free Congregations, and especially the societies for the "Religion of Humanity," had already accepted women as members into their organizations prior to the revolution. After their arrival in the United States, German women certainly were not willing to accept lesser stature than they had enjoyed before.

Unfortunately, today we lack access to reliable membership information for most German-American Free Congregations. It either has been destroyed or never was recorded. The most substantive numbers we have today are the ones listed in the records of the national organization, the *Bund der Freien Gemeinden und Freidenker Vereine*, after it was reorganized in 1897. The following statistics show the numbers of female and male members for the Free Congregations of Sauk City, Milwaukee, and Bostwick Valley, Wisconsin. Also included are numbers for the Ladies Aid Societies where available.<sup>17</sup> Comments on the Ladies Aid Societies will follow below.

What is interesting is not only the fact that women were allowed to become members, but also that in some societies, such as in Bostwick Valley and Sauk City, female membership reached or even exceeded fifty percent. Although these numbers illustrate clearly that women were attracted to Free Congregations, it would be inappropriate to draw the conclusion that women generally made up the majority of members. Although records are spotty, there is evidence that in other locations women made up only approximately thirty percent of the membership. The degree to which women joined societies most likely depended on local circumstances.

Records also prove that women were allowed to be voted into office. The Free Congregation of Sauk City was led by a female president for a number of years during the 1880s. Such was also the case with the Free Congregation of St. Louis, Missouri, where Mrs. Kalck was elected president in 1899. In March 1880 Fannie Oppenheimer was voted into office as corresponding secretary for the Indianapolis Freethinker Society and continued in this office for a number of years.<sup>18</sup> Also in Milwaukee women held offices on various committees or even the executive body.<sup>19</sup> Women also were represented at the national level. April 13-14, 1871, the *Bund der deutschen freien Gemeinden von Nordamerika* gathered for their second national meeting in Milwaukee. Elise Schröter and Julie Schramm represented the Free Congregation of Sauk City and Mrs. Pietsch was among the delegates for the Milwaukee society.<sup>20</sup> In contrast to nearly all other German organizations, Free Congregations and Freethinker Societies offered women a place in highly responsible executive bodies. The proportion of female members and female officers, however, does not correlate. Men still held the majority of offices in most societies. One can only speculate as to the reasons for this. It is still unknown whether women were more reluctant to be nominated as candidates, or if they simply were not successful in elections. It is noteworthy that in most cases females held specifically the office of

secretary or corresponding secretary for the society. Again it remains in the realms of speculation if it was assumed that women might have better writing skills or were more communicative than men. But the fact that women had a constitutional right to hold office was also "imported" from Germany. The right for women to become officers had firmly been established in Free Congregations in Germany by 1850, prior to the migration of members to the United States.<sup>21</sup>

Although public appearances for women routinely were not encouraged, German-American Free Congregations allowed female speakers to take to the podiums. Woman who belonged to the society as well as prominent females such as Amalie von Ende, Mathilde Franziska Anneke, or Clara Neymann, were frequent speakers throughout the country. In 1866 Auguste Lilienthal spoke publicly before the *Bund der Freidenker* of New York City. Her lecture on equal rights for men and women was printed in the July issue 1866 of the *Blätter für freies religiöses Leben*, the national magazine for German Free Congregations and Freethinker Societies in the United States.<sup>22</sup> From the 1860s onward female speakers appeared in programs throughout the country. In 1883 Mathilde Anneke was declared an honorary member of the Free Congregation of Milwaukee for her many services to the society. From 1887 to 1889 Hedwig Henrich-Wilhelmi, a leading German feminist, toured the United States and lectured in front of nearly all German-American Free Congregations and Freethinker Societies throughout the country. In her lectures she propagated equal rights for men and women, and demanded equal access to university education and employment. In Indianapolis she earned forty dollars for her visit, a substantial amount of money for the time. Her lectures were published by the Freethinker Publishing Company in Milwaukee and advertised widely.<sup>23</sup> In 1899 five of the fifteen lectures held during the year at the Free Congregation of South St. Louis were presented by women.<sup>24</sup> All of this suggests that women in the Freethinker-movement were given a public forum that allowed their voices to be heard.

In Germany, Free Congregations were led by university-trained theologians who were forced out of their positions for their rationalistic beliefs. They were responsible for the preparation and conduct of most meeting lectures. Thus not many laypersons—men or women—had an opportunity to step up to the podiums. Only the organizations of the "Religion of Humanity" had a structure that allowed women to speak to a public audience. Thus the appearance of female speakers within the German-American community was new. It was not brought over with the German immigrants but rather developed during the 1870s and 1880s alongside the overall women's movement in the United States. Although female speakers were already quite common in other radical reform movements in the United States at the time, for most German-American communities this was quite unique, in that they maintained a more conservative viewpoint toward male and female spheres.

The founding of schools and kindergartens became integral parts of the societies' activities, since education was a key issue within the societies. Most parents refused to send their children to Lutheran or Catholic parochial schools. But among the many immigrants who came to the United States after the revolution were a number of well-educated teachers seeking employment. As early as 1851 the Free Congregation of Saint Louis had founded a school for children that offered a secular primary education. Other congregations followed soon thereafter. In 1860 the first report of the four Free Congregations belonging to the national *Bund* revealed that all of

**Free Congregation of Milwaukee, WI, founded in 1867**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Members total</b>	<b>Female Members</b>	<b>Members Ladies Aid Society, founded 1867</b>
1881	117	No records	10
1897/98	137	No records	40
1898/99	157	No records	40
1899/00	157	No records	40
1901/02	159	No records	29
1902/03	166	No records	22
1903/04	182	No records	18
1905/06	188	No records	20
1907/08	189	58	25
1908/09	189	58	25
1910/1911	147	No records	24
1911/1912	133	No records	21
1912/1913	139	No records	24
1913/1914	126	No records	22
1917/18	150	27	27
1919/20	213	61	39
1921/22	249	74	52



**Free Congregation of Bostwick Valley, WI, founded 1869**  
**No Ladies Aid Society**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Members total</b>	<b>Female Members</b>
1899	27 No record	No records
1901/1902	27	No records
1902/1903	27	No records
1903/1904	27	No records
1905/1906	27	No records
1907/1908	25	11
1908/1909	25 No records	11
1910/1911	22	11
1911/1912	20	10
1912/1913	20	10
1913/1914	20	10

**Free Congregation of Sauk City, WI, founded in 1852**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Members total</b>	<b>Female Members</b>	<b>Members Ladies Aid Society, founded 1885</b>
1899	89	No records	16
1901/1902	88	No records	18
1902/1903	92	No records	21
1903/1904	86	No records	25
1905/1906	83	No records	27
1907/1908	84	49	29
1908/1909	84	48	No records
1910/1911	82	48	No records
1911/1912	78	44	30
1912/1913	76	43	30
1913/1914	82	49	No records

them had independent schools. The largest among them was the school of the Free Congregation of Philadelphia with approximately 100 students; Saint Louis had approximately 85 pupils. In 1855 Friedrich Schünemann-Pott published his *Lieder und Gedichte zum Gebrauch für Versammlungen, Schulen und Haus freier Gemeinden*, a collection of songs, poems, and essays suitable as teaching material.<sup>25</sup> Three years later his first primer, *Erstes Elementar- und Lesebuch für Schule und Haus*, followed.<sup>26</sup> Due to its popularity the book was printed in five editions as of 1874.

These private secular institutions did not only teach in German, but also had two other advantages. First, they paused for only a few weeks in the summer. American public schools, especially those in rural areas, frequently offered as little as only a few months of schooling during the winter time, when children were not needed on the farms. The free schools, however, could be attended for most of the year. Second, the free schools adopted innovative new teaching methods. Based upon the pedagogical concepts of education pioneers such as Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Friedrich Fröbel, and Adolph Diesterweg, children were to explore their environment and abandon the common practice of mere memorization. The Bible was banned as reading and teaching material. Instead boys and girls received a sound education in German and English, math, drawing, geography, history, chemistry, gymnastics, and music.<sup>27</sup> Corporal punishment also was banned. In cases where Free Congregations were too small to run or finance entire schools, or where independent schools already existed, the congregations offered at least Sunday-school classes for children. We find an example of this in Milwaukee, where the German-English Academy was founded in 1851. In Indianapolis such a Sunday school was established in 1871; Milwaukee followed suit in 1879. Both offered classes to children as young as kindergarten age.<sup>28</sup>

In most cases women were among the teachers for the grade schools as well as the Sunday-schools. Although we can assume that Sunday-school teachers did not receive any financial compensation, records show clearly that teachers in grade schools collected an annual salary. In 1874 two of the four teachers of the school of the Philadelphia Free Congregation were women. Although men were given preference over women in hiring, free schools frequently offered employment and income to females.

In addition to the professional opportunities for women, Free Congregations regarded the sound education for its female members as crucial. Women were also mothers and therefore responsible for the education of their children. Although it went unquestioned that it was a woman's job to raise the children, motherhood was not understood as a biologically determined skill. Instead proper knowledge and insights into pedagogical concepts became increasingly important to fulfill the tasks of a "good mother."

Although Free Congregations and Freethinker societies offered women a place in their ranks, women's rights were also focal points of discussions. The lists of discussion topics for various societies reveal that the question was often brought up during official weekly meetings. Already in 1866, shortly after the Civil War, Auguste Lilienthal, a member of the Freethinker Society of New York City, gave a lecture on "Women's Rights." The topic remained on the lecture list when Adolf Douai spoke in Hoboken on "Woman's Rights and Female Education" in the same year. During subsequent decades the issue remained a focal point of many lectures,

evening debates, and discussions in free congregations from east to west. Generally, members supported women's suffrage. Key figures of the national *Bund* such as Friedrich Schünemann-Pott, the Bund's president and speaker in Philadelphia, or Eduard Schröter, speaker of Sauk City, were very outspoken in favor of equal rights for men and women. Furthermore, Hermann Boppe, chief editor of *Der Freidenker*, the most widely circulating newspaper among Freethinkers, as well as his close friend Karl Heinzen, supported women's rights. On 27 April 1879 Fannie Oppenheimer of Indianapolis gave a lecture on the "Position of Women towards the Social Questions"; and on December 18, 1887, the society engaged in a debate on woman's right to vote; a majority of respondents decided in favor of the proposal.<sup>29</sup> As mentioned above, one of the leading German feminists, Hedwig Henrich-Wilhelmi, toured the United States and spoke on the issue throughout the country. Furthermore, as Anke Ortlepp has shown, Mathilde Anneke was an important link between the Free Congregation movement and the Wisconsin Women Suffrage Association (NWSA) in Milwaukee.<sup>30</sup> Since equal rights for men and women had traditionally been a topic within the movement even since its beginning in Germany, the issue was kept alive in all congregations throughout the United States. Not only women but also men gave their full support. Nearly all the leading members such as Hermann Boppe and Karl Heinzen spoke and published widely on the topic.

Compared to other German-American organizations, the roles female members were allowed to take within the Free Congregations were unusual. Annette Hofmann and Gertrud Pfister have described the long and tedious manner in which women gained equal membership in Turner societies, a struggle that lasted well into the twentieth century. Although the women's auxiliaries, to which female participation was mainly confined to, often provided vital financial backing and the framework for most social functions in the Turner halls, full membership was not officially granted to females by the national Turnerbund until the beginning of the twentieth century. Consequently women did not hold any offices or appear in public. Furthermore, their public appearance in local or national Turnfests also was not permitted until the 1920s despite the fact that females had participated in girls' and women's classes.<sup>31</sup>

The traditional place for women in German-American societies was the Ladies Auxiliaries or Ladies Aid Societies. These were established alongside the male organizations. They had primarily supportive functions although the Ladies Auxiliary operated quite independently from the male society. Most Turner Societies also had their Ladies Auxiliaries which were primarily responsible for catering the many annual events, fund raising, or taking charge of physical education supervision for girls' sport classes.<sup>32</sup> Although one might view the Ladies Auxiliary as evidence of exclusion, it must also be seen as a place that women created by and for themselves. Ladies societies were places that functioned very independently from the main society in terms of leadership, finances, and programs they offered. Here women were elected as officers, spoke publicly to their fellow members, and had full control over their activities. It was also a place for fellowship and networking. Although Ladies Auxiliaries indeed were separate they offered females opportunities the main society did not.

But ladies auxiliaries were not always part of Free Congregations or Freethinker societies. A number of the larger societies such as the Free Congregations of Philadelphia, South St. Louis, San Francisco, or Rochester did not have separate ladies groups. Here women participated actively in the society as discussants, officers,

lecturers, listeners, kindergarten teachers, or Sunday-school teachers. However, one also can find a number of Free Congregations and Freethinker Societies that had Ladies Auxiliaries in addition to their female membership. Similar to the separate Ladies Societies for the Turners, these also had specific functions. As Anke Ortdepp has demonstrated relative to the Milwaukee Free Congregation, the Ladies Auxiliary supported the society financially and created a sense of identity and belonging by organizing many social events.<sup>33</sup>

### **The Concept of Female Nourishment**

But why did women in Freethinker organizations have different roles than in the Turner Societies? And why do we find Ladies Auxiliaries alongside female membership in some Free Congregations and not in others? The Turners and Freethinkers subscribed to two different views on women's spheres, reflecting two ideologies that existed side by side in the nineteenth century. The Turners supported the traditional separate sphere ideology in which men and women occupied two independent and opposing spaces. While males lived in a public world that gave them access to employment outside the home, and involvement in economic and political activities, the female world was associated with the notion of domesticity, emotionality, responsibility for the well being and nurturing of the family, and the education of the children. Men were in constant danger from the assumed corruptness of the outside world, but women would remain morally pure. Therefore, they would be the guardians of a private virtue they would instill in others inside the home. Consequently, it was assumed, the private sphere within the home and its female occupants needed to be protected from the outside.<sup>34</sup>

Although the Turner movement in Germany was closely associated with the reform attempts of the 1848-Revolution, and later with Civil War activities in the United States, its connections to military activities and physical exercise had kept women outside the movement. In the United States the founding of ladies auxiliaries alongside male societies was an appropriate way to be associated with Turner clubs yet also remain in separate units that replicated domestic occupation. Benevolent activities that correspondent with the "private sphere" were an area in which female participation was socially approved and even needed. As described by a number of studies, activities of Turners Ladies Auxiliaries included fundraising, the organization of social functions, catering, caring for the children of the gymnastic classes, and other activities with which women were traditionally familiar with.

The German-American Freethinkers generally subscribed to the same image of women but went one step further and drew different conclusions. Freethinkers also believed in the separate sphere model. However, they also identified with the reform movements that were bound to bring about changes in society. Therefore, if women were indeed morally superior to men, then their virtues could be the force behind the transformation of society. Women not only had a right to be heard but also had a duty to speak out on issues that were important to all. Women had the responsibility to protect and sustain the nation's moral health. Public activism thus was regarded as an expression of their moral duty to reeducate a confused public. From the very beginning Free Congregations offered women a place where they would be equal to men and fulfill their duty of "redemptive motherhood" for the nation. Public

involvement was, therefore, seen as a natural and necessary expansion of the duties of the fostering mother.<sup>35</sup> Interestingly enough, this theory of "redemptive motherhood" that has been proposed to describe the view of women in the time of the American Revolution applies here again. Given the close intellectual ties between the German-American Free Congregations and the American Revolution, this should not appear altogether surprising. The principal role models of the movements were Thomas Paine and George Washington, who were hailed for their religious skepticism as well as their political and civil courage as founding fathers. Therefore, the female virtues that applied to American revolutionary times also swept through Europe, where they were seen in the European revolutions and re-imported to the United States by immigrants. European immigrant women after 1848 brought with them a sound self-conscience and clear ideas about the female role in society. Rooted deeply in the ideologies of the German revolution, Free Congregations displayed an image of women that was typical for reform movements.

The second reason why women had their place in the Freethinker-movement was the educational goals of the movement. By building free schools and offering insights into the latest scientific discussions through public lectures and debates, Free Congregations had proven their sincere interest in education. Learning and knowledge were keys to societal changes and the development of the individual. Additionally, education was one of the main duties of mothers caring for the children and raising families. A "professional" mother needed to be trained and taught. To be a well-versed mother, one had to be informed about the latest pedagogical concepts, and the most up-to-date insights into nutrition and biological functions. A wide range of topics were discussed each week by experts in the congregation and listened to by women. Free Congregations were places where women could be educated beyond a primary level. Before women's colleges emerged in larger numbers and middle-class families sent their daughters to these institutions, these weekly popular scientific lectures, especially in rural areas, transmitted important up-to-date scientific results outside the circles of experts.

By having women's aid societies as well as allowing women to become members, Free Congregations showed that they actually embraced both concepts. Women provided moral, ethical, and bodily nourishment. Yet women also contributed to public debates on social, moral, economic, and political problems in addition to carrying out benevolent activities in the separate ladies group. Although Women's Aid Societies were not connected to all Free Congregations, they were more common in larger congregations that offered more public and cultural events. In Milwaukee, for example, the Ladies Society of the Free Congregation was founded in 1867. The bylaws of 1927 still defined its role as "support of the congregation with all means which belong to the realm of female nourishment."<sup>36</sup>

In the course of the twentieth century Turner societies and most other German-American organizations also adjusted their view of women. From their traditional image of women as being pure and needing protection they shifted to a more modern concept that saw women contribute above and beyond their activities within Aid Societies. For the better part of the nineteenth century, though, Turners proved that most local societies—although they were counted towards the liberal end of German-American Societies—remained true to a traditional concept of the woman's place in society. Free Congregations and Freethinker Societies were the pioneers among

German-American societies of the nineteenth century in striving to gain equal rights for women and support them in their quest for political equality.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Blätter für freies religiöses Leben* 5, 9 (March 1861): 140-43.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Leslie Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in 19th Century America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1981). Also see Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920," *The American Historical Review* 89, 3 (June 1984): 620-47.

<sup>3</sup> Catherine Holden Prelinger, "A Decade of Dissent in Germany: A Historical Study of the Society of Protestant Friends and the German Catholic Church, 1840-1848," Diss., Yale University, 1954, 48-50. This is the most comprehensive English language study on the religious dissent movement in Germany in the 1840s.

<sup>4</sup> Bettina Goldberg, "Radical German-American Freethinkers and the Socialist Movement: The Freie Gemeinde in Milwaukee, Wisconsin," in *German Worker's Culture in the United States, 1850-1920*, ed. Hartmut Keil (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), 242-43.

<sup>5</sup> Jörn Brederlow, *Lichtfreunde und Freie Gemeinden: Religiöser Protest und Freiheitsbewegung im Vormärz und in der Revolution von 1848/49* (München/Wien: Oldenbourg, 1976), 85.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>7</sup> Sylvia Paletschek, *Frauen und Dissens Frauen im Deutschkatholizismus und in den Freien Gemeinden 1841-1852*, Kritische Studien zur Geschichtswissenschaft 98 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 52; Anke Ortlepp, *Auf denn, Ihr Schwestern! Deutschamerikanische Frauenvereine in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1844-1914*, Transatlantische Historische Studien 17 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2004), 169.

<sup>8</sup> Ortlepp, 169.

<sup>9</sup> Ute Gerhard, "Über die Anfänge der deutschen Frauenbewegung um 1848: Frauenpresse, Frauenpolitik, Frauenvereine," in Karin Hausen, *Frauen suchen ihre Geschichte: Historische Studien zum 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (München: C. H. Beck, 1983), 196-220.

<sup>10</sup> "Jahresbotschaft des Vice-Präsidenten der deutschen Freien Gemeinde von Philadelphia an die Mitglieder derselben," *Blätter für freies religiöses Leben* 4,7 (January 1860): 154. Thirteen of the thirty-four female members payed dues. The remaining twenty-one women were covered by family memberships for husband and wife.

<sup>11</sup> "Jahres-Botschaft des Präsidenten der deutschen freien Gemeinde von Philadelphia an die Mitglieder derselben," *Blätter für freies religiöses Leben* 3,6 (December 1860): 155.

<sup>12</sup> Carl Lüdeking, "Vortrag gehalten bei der Eröffnung der neu erbauten Halle der deutschen Freien Gemeinde von Nord-St. Louis am 29. September 1867" (St. Louis, MO, 1867), 4.

<sup>13</sup> "Constitution der freien Gemeinde zu Milwaukee," *Blätter für freies Religiöses Leben* 12,1 (July 1867).

<sup>14</sup> "Das Protokoll des Freidenker Vereins von Indianapolis, Indiana, 1870-1890," ed. Giles R. Hoyt, Claudia Grossmann and Sabine Jessner, unpublished manuscript, Indianapolis 1988, 19, fourth para.: "Jede Person von unbescholtenem Charakter."

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>16</sup> "Beschlüsse der vierten Tagsatzung des Bundes der Deutschen Freien Gemeinden von Nord-Amerika gehalten in Philadelphia am 26. und 27. Juni 1876," 4. II. "Resolutionen über principiellen Fragen: Dagegen soll andererseits das volle Bürgerrecht und Stimmrecht keinem vernünftigen volljährigen Menschen versagt sein, ohne Unterschied der Rasse, Hautfarbe oder des Geschlechts."

<sup>17</sup> "Statistischer Bericht über das erste Jahrzehnt seines Bestehens, 1897-1907," handwritten list among the published annual reports of the *Bund der Freien Gemeinden und Freidenker-Vereine von Nord Amerika*, Records of the Free Congregation of Sauk City, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

<sup>18</sup> See "Das Protokoll des Freidenker Vereins von Indianapolis, Indiana, 1870-1890," 58.

- <sup>19</sup> See Ortlepp, 172.
- <sup>20</sup> "Die zweite Tagsatzung des Bundes der deutschen freien Gemeinden von Nordamerika gehalten zu Milwaukee, den 13. und 14. April 1871 (Offizieller Bericht)" *Blätter für freies religiöses Leben* 15,12 (June 1871).
- <sup>21</sup> Paletschek, 174.
- <sup>22</sup> Auguste Lilienthal, "Über die politische Gleichberechtigung der Frauen mit den Männern," *Blätter für freies religiöses Leben* 11,1 (July 1866).
- <sup>23</sup> Hedwig Henrich-Wilhelmi, *Vorträge gehalten von Hedwig Henrich-Wilhelmi, gehalten in Amerika in den Jahren 1887-1889* (Milwaukee: Freidenker Publishing Company, 1889). For biographical information see Katja Rampelmann, *Im Licht der Vernunft: Der deutsch-amerikanische Freidenker-Almanach von 1878-1901*, *Transatlantische Historische Studien* 13 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2003), 257-58.
- <sup>24</sup> *Jahresbericht des Bundes der Freien Gemeinden und Freidenker-Vereine von Nord-Amerika, 1. Juli 1901 bis 30. Juni 1902* (Milwaukee: Freidenker Publishing Co., 1902), 4.
- <sup>25</sup> Friedrich Schünemann-Pott, *Lieder und Gedichte zum Gebrauch für Versammlungen, Schulen und Haus freier Gemeinden* (Philadelphia, 1855).
- <sup>26</sup> Friedrich Schünemann-Pott, *Erstes Elementar- und Lesebuch für Schule und Haus* (Philadelphia, 1858).
- <sup>27</sup> See Bettina Goldberg, "Die Achtundvierziger und das Schulwesen in Amerika: Zur Theorie und Praxis ihrer Reformbestrebung," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 32,4 (1987): 481-91.
- <sup>28</sup> Ortlepp, 177-78.
- <sup>29</sup> "Das Protokoll des Freidenker Vereins von Indianapolis, Indiana, 1870-1890," 86.
- <sup>30</sup> Ortlepp, 181-83.
- <sup>31</sup> See Gertrud Pfister and Annette R. Hofmann, "Female Turners in Germany and the United States until World War I" in *Turnen and Sport*, ed. Annette R. Hofmann (Münster: Waxmann, 2004), 25-68.
- <sup>32</sup> Alida J. Moonen, "The Indianapolis Athenaeum Women's Auxiliary," in *Turnen und Sport*, ed. Annette R. Hofmann, 147-70; Annette R. Hofmann, *Aufstieg und Niedergang des deutschen Turnens in den USA* (Schorndorf: Hofmann, 2001), 228-31.
- <sup>33</sup> Ortlepp, 174-83.
- <sup>34</sup> For a general discussion on the "separate spheres concept" see Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Women's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *The Journal of American History* 75,1 (June 1988): 9-39.
- <sup>35</sup> For similar views of women during the American Revolution and the concept of "republican motherhood" see Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters. The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (New York: Boston: Little Brown, 1980); Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Women in the Age of the American Revolution* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1989).
- <sup>36</sup> *Verfassung der Freien Gemeinde von Milwaukee* (Milwaukee, 1927), 12: "Zweck: die Gemeinde durch alle Mittel, welche im Bereiche weiblicher Fürsorge liegen, zu unterstützen."