

Miss Cooper is professor emeritus of English in Wisconsin State College, Superior. Since her retirement, she has concentrated her studies on the history of religious liberalism among German settlers in the upper Midwest.

Die freie Gemeinde

FREETHINKERS on the FRONTIER

BERENICE COOPER

"TO UNITE the foes of clericalism, official dishonesty and hypocrisy, and to unite the friends of truth, uprightness, and honesty"—these were the purposes of the Free Congregations which flourished briefly on the frontier of the upper Midwest from 1850 to 1880.¹ The *freien Gemeinden*, as these groups were called, have received little recognition from historiographers for the contribution they made to the cultural and social life of the pioneers in southern Minnesota. Although their advanced views make them significant in the intellectual history of the nineteenth century, it is not strange that they have been generally ignored. They were only a small minority among the German settlers in Stillwater, St. Paul, Minneapolis, New Ulm, Medina, and Osseo. Also, they conducted their meetings and recorded their minutes entirely in German; their national magazine, *Blätter für freies religiöses Leben* (Periodical for Free Religious Life),

and the books and pamphlets about their beliefs were published in that language.

As a consequence, information about the activities of the Free Congregations has remained buried in these publications except when a curious scholar has sought out the relatively obscure material to find that the freethinkers were nearly a century ahead of the orthodox churches. Their religious philosophy, which emphasized improvement of life in this world rather than preparation for heaven, anticipated the "death of God" theology of today.²

The Free Congregations originated in both Protestant and Catholic churches in Germany between 1840 and 1846 as a protest against the orthodoxy which demanded that members accept without question the theological dogmas laid down by church authorities. Those members who withdrew to organize Free Congregations insisted that an individual has the right to hold those convictions about religious truths which his study of history and science leads him to accept as reasonable and as consistent with the growing knowledge of the nature of the universe and of man.³

Not only did the *freien Gemeinden* respect the individual intellect, but they protected the independence of the local congregation by avoiding every characteristic that re-

¹J. J. Schlicher, "Eduard Schroeter the Humanist," in *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 28:174 (December, 1944).

²Friedrich Schünemann-Pott, *Die freie Gemeinde: Ein Zeugnis aus ihr und über sie, an die Denkenden unter ihren Verächtern*, 8-10 (Philadelphia, 1861).

³William Schaefer, ed., *Die Freireligiöse Bewegung Wesen und Auftrag*, 34-66 (Mainz, 1959); Max Hempel, *Was sind die Freien Gemeinden?* 3-5 (Milwaukee, 1902).



*Friedrich
Schünemann-Pott*

sembled church hierarchy. The supreme authority was the local congregation represented by the democratic vote of its members. Their national organization, *Bund der freien Gemeinden von Nordamerika*, was a loose federation of local societies. No action of the national group was binding upon a local unit until its members had voted on it. The term "speaker" was substituted for "minister," "pastor," or "priest." Meeting places were called halls, not churches. Instead of sermons at their gatherings, the freethinkers listened to lectures on science, history, philosophy, and literature, or they held discussions on these subjects.⁴

When the failure of the Revolution of 1848 prompted many Germans to emigrate to the United States, some members of Free Congregations were among them—especially those whose political activities in support of the revolution had resulted in their persecution by the victorious conservative forces of government and church. In the United States the separation of church and

state promised freedom from authoritarian religion and liberty to teach the principles in which the freethinkers believed.⁵

TWO prominent leaders of the Free Congregation movement in Germany who had clashed with government and church authorities were Eduard Schröter (1826–1891) and Friedrich Schünemann-Pott (1811–1888). Schröter was exiled in 1850 for his work on behalf of the Free Congregations at Worms and arrived in the United States that year. Schünemann-Pott, "the leading spirit . . . in freethinking religious groups among the Germans in this country," had been imprisoned briefly in 1848 and nar-

⁴ *Blätter für freies religiöses Leben*, 13:140 (March, 1869); *Geschichtliche Mittheilungen über die Deutschen Freien Gemeinden von Nordamerika*, 59–71, 80–83 (Philadelphia, 1877); *Verfassung der Christlichen Gemeinde in Schweinfurt*, 2 (Schweinfurt, 1849); James Hastings, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, 4:674 (New York, 1912).

⁵ Hempel, *Was sind die Freien Gemeinden?* 9.

rowly escaped prison a second time by emigrating to the New World in 1854.⁶

Both men became active missionary lecturers and organizers of Free Congregations. Each accepted a position as speaker of a congregation — Schröter at Sauk City, Wisconsin, from 1853 until his death, and Schünemann-Pott in Philadelphia from 1854 to 1871, when he accepted a call from San Francisco.⁷

Schünemann-Pott's lecture tours included five trips into southern Minnesota between 1868 and 1873. His "Travel-Letters," published in the *Blätter* over a four-year period, are the best available information on Free Congregations in St. Paul, Stillwater, Minneapolis, and New Ulm. His records are supplemented by Schröter's report on the organization in 1872 of a short-lived Association of Free Thinkers in St. Paul. The accounts of both men were published in *Blätter für freies religiöses Leben*.⁸

This magazine, edited by Schünemann-Pott from 1856 to 1872, contains much valuable information about the Free Congregations. Letters from readers, reports of local activities such as reading circles, dramatic programs, concerts, lectures, and libraries, and articles on science, history, philosophy, and literature show the intellectual concerns of the groups. Even the tiny units at Medina and Osseo circulated books



Eduard Schröter

on what Schünemann-Pott designated as "our new world philosophy."⁹

Many of the Free Congregation members were also members of the German Turnverein, a liberal organization whose motto was *mens sana in corpore sano* (a sound mind in a sound body). The Turners met for gymnastic classes and readings. They also sponsored musical programs. They were in sympathy with the ideas of the *Gemeinde*. Sometimes a small group of freethinkers met in the Turners' buildings, and it appears from Schünemann-Pott's "Travel-Letters" that a Turner group often sponsored his lectures. This was the case in 1869 and 1870 when the speaker visited St. Paul, Minneapolis, and New Ulm.¹⁰

Even before 1869 there is evidence that at least two groups in Minnesota, independent of any sponsorship, had enough interest in free religion to organize informally to discuss their common concerns. From Medina in 1867, John Wolsfeld, the librarian of the society formed there, wrote Schünemann-Pott that a copy of the *Blätter* had

⁶ A. E. Zucker, ed., *The Forty-Eighters: Political Refugees of the German Revolution of 1848*, 341 (New York, 1950).

⁷ For Schröter's life, see Schlicher, in *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 28:169–183. See also Eduard Schröter, "Zehn Jahre in Amerika," in *Blätter für freies religiöses Leben*, 5:42 (September, 1860), continued serially through 11:186–188 (June, 1867). For the life of Schünemann-Pott, see "Aus meinem Leben," in *Blätter*, 18:93–97 (November, 1873), continued serially through 19:257–262 (May, 1875).

⁸ *Blätter*, 14:9–12, 90 (July, December, 1869), 181–184 (June, 1870); 17:14–16 (July, 1872); 18:12–15 (July, 1873). See also *St. Paul Pioneer*, February 25, 1872.

⁹ *Blätter*, 4:17 (August, 1859); 13:112 (January, 1869); 14:91.

¹⁰ Zucker, *The Forty-Eighters*, 79; *Blätter*, 13:9 (May, 1869); 14:181. See also *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 11, 1869.

come by chance into his hands. He added that it was a welcome sight because "For four years a number of men from Medina, who live scattered about a fifteen-mile radius, have met in their log houses to organize a Freimänner-Verein von Medina [*Society of Free Men of Medina*]. The aim is to promote spiritual freedom. The society consists of sixteen members, sincere, plain, simple men who have enjoyed barely an elementary education, yet are blessed with the best wish and will to work for strength for themselves and others so that the darkness of authoritarian belief may be broken and the light of reason and natural law will be recognized. We lack an educated leader or speaker and must help ourselves the best we can." Wolsfeld went on to describe his group's monthly meeting at which "we busy ourselves with reading aloud, lectures, debates on current questions." He noted that the money collected was used to purchase books and magazines, for the congregation intended to "build up a little library of select scientific works and, as soon as possible to unite with your *Gemeinde*. How and in what manner should we proceed?"¹¹

In a footnote to this letter Schünemann-Pott replied that "We are united by letters with many strong friends in the Northwest, and hope to hear further from this group." The only sequel is a letter dated May, 1868, in which Wolsfeld explains why the "Free Men" had not joined the national organization: "We have only a few members scattered over twenty miles. . . . Soon another *Gemeinde* of twelve men will join us and also eight men from Minneapolis. Then, we hope to join the *Bund*."¹²

The other small Minnesota group reporting to the *Blätter* was at Osseo. Moritz Schwappach, its secretary, wrote in February, 1868, that twelve men had organized to combat "priestcraft and Bible-believing Church-going men" and that they were circulating the works of Thomas Paine and David F. Strauss's *A New Life of Jesus* for reading and group discussion.¹³ They celebrated Paine's birthday. They also pur-

chased a cemetery. Clearly, there was an interest in free religion among the German pioneers in Minnesota at least four years before Schünemann-Pott's first visit on October 10, 1868.

THIS VISIT occurred as part of a "missionary journey" of nearly 4,500 miles made between September 26 and November 11, 1868. It included lectures by Schünemann-Pott in Milwaukee, La Crosse, and Sauk City, Wisconsin; Ottawa, La Salle, and Chicago, Illinois; Detroit, Michigan; Indianapolis, Indiana; and Parkersburg, West Virginia. His detailed reports show him to have been pleased by the response of his audiences, proud of the part that industrious Germans were playing in building a new life in Minnesota, and at first highly optimistic about the growth of the Free Congregations.

"Almost everywhere," he wrote, "in spite of the political excitement of the choice of a president, the gatherings were well attended, the lectures were received with open susceptibility and warm assent; everywhere an observing circle of strong men and women showed themselves prepared for a different representation of a world philosophy, which I developed from fundamental principles. . . . For me, the experience of my travels has warmed my heart, renewed my courage, strengthened my hope, and widened my vision. And so out of a full heart, I send my best greetings in thankful memory and with wishes of seeing soon again all the friends."¹⁴

Schünemann-Pott did return to his friends in Minnesota in 1869. At St. Paul on May 8 he found "a hearty reception from the hos-

¹¹ *Blätter*, 12:15 (July, 1867).

¹² *Blätter*, 13:31 (August, 1868). According to Isaac Atwater and John H. Stevens, eds., *History of Minneapolis and Hennepin County*, 2:1223, 1320 (New York and Chicago, 1895), the Medina society established a cemetery in 1868 and built a hall at Long Lake in 1874.

¹³ *Blätter*, 12:140 (March, 1868).

¹⁴ *Blätter*, 13:112. The political race of 1868 was between Ulysses S. Grant and Horatio Seymour.

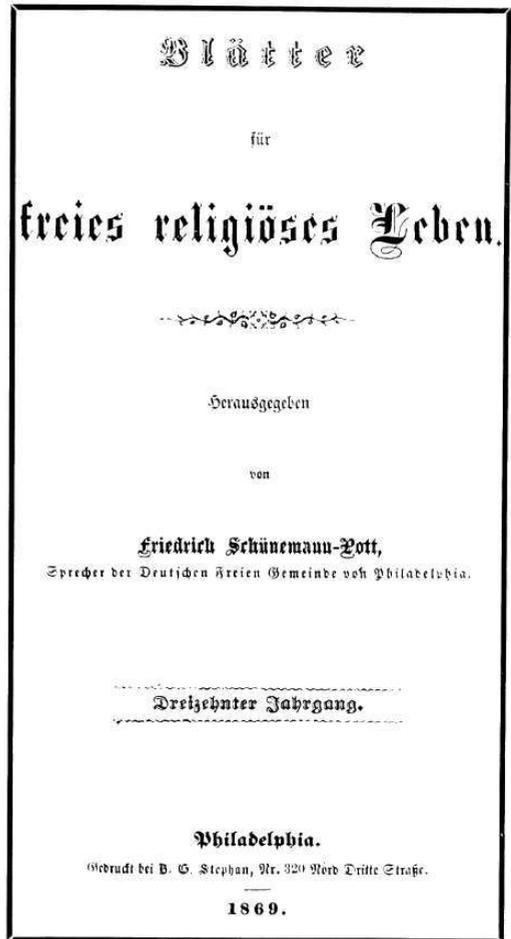
pitable group of Herr Carl Scheffer, the former state treasurer now a copartner of a very important business firm of the Northwest and president of the First National Bank." Of his speech there the next day he wrote: "Under the auspices of the Turnverein, I gave my first lecture . . . my seeds of thought fell on receptive ground."¹⁵

On May 10 he journeyed "through forest and field with Mr. Scheffer to Stillwater . . . the principal emporium of many kinds of timber business. Giant rafts, floated to the Mississippi from here, down to the open market in St. Louis." He reported the majority of the Stillwater Germans were Catholic, but "that the friends of freedom are not lacking was proved by the evening meeting which was attended by a larger number than was expected. The audience listened attentively." The following evening in Minneapolis, "a comparatively large audience" gathered for his lecture, and an "exchange of views among alert men continued a few hours, late into the night."¹⁶

After two more speeches in St. Paul before "large audiences," Schünemann-Pott traveled to New Ulm. He rode a train seventy-five miles to St. Peter, stayed overnight there, and finally made "an easy trip 30 miles over the prairies to New Ulm . . . a child of the Turnverein, which ought to become a hotbed of every kind of freedom." He noted that for this city there had been "no lack of struggle and hardship. Scarcely seven years have elapsed since that fearful catastrophe, the Indian massacre . . . shocked the entire civilized world. . . . Almost the entire city was burned down, all the fields were laid waste, and many inhabitants murdered. . . . But with relentless energy and redoubled fervor those who returned went back to work. . . . [and] to-

¹⁵ *Blätter*, 14:9, 10. Charles Scheffer was state treasurer from 1859 to 1865. He had been president of the National Bank at Stillwater and was a partner in the drygoods firm of Auerbach, Finch, and Scheffer. *Minneapolis Tribune*, August 10, 1875; *Ketchum & Crawford's St. Paul City Directory for 1869*, p. 156.

¹⁶ *Blätter*, 14:10.



A title page of the freethinkers' journal

day New Ulm, beautifully situated on the prairie between the Minnesota River and the bluffs, presents as flourishing a scene as is to be found anywhere in the newly settled Northwest."

He wrote that upon his arrival, he was received "with open arms, for in the last few years, especially through the Bohemian immigrants, Catholicism here, as everywhere, has penetrated, and the old Lutherans and the Methodists have gathered little congregations. During this time, the Free Thinkers, who have a powerful support and center in the Turnverein have not increased in numbers. The meeting in the roomy Turner Hall on Whitsunday morning was extraordinarily well attended, and the effect

of my lecture was so significant that at once introductory steps were taken for organizing a free religious society, the success of which one may hope will be soon reported.”¹⁷

In the fall of 1869 Schünemann-Pott again visited St. Paul, Stillwater, Minneapolis, and New Ulm, but his accounts mention the trip only briefly, since “I have spoken of Minnesota in detail in my earlier ‘Travel-Letters.’” He did make two interesting comments. Of his St. Paul audience he said: “It seemed as if the entire German intelligentsia . . . was present” and added that “Everywhere I met with approval of my message. The young *Gemeinde* in New Ulm is growing vigorously, and it will not be long before this growth will be apparent in other places.”¹⁸

SCHÜNEMANN-POTT’S fourth trip to Minnesota within a year and a half had its

disappointments and difficulties. His first talk in the capital city on April 14, arranged through the co-operation of the Turnverein and the *Gemeinde*, was “only fairly well attended because of the bad weather . . . and because the Athenaeum, where the meeting was held, was rather far from the center of the city.”¹⁹

Despite this drawback, he reported that a large number of farmers from more distant points such as Carver City and Young America “hurried here in order to hear the lecture. And what the gathering lacked in numbers it made up in concentrated atten-

¹⁷ The quotations here and in the following paragraph are from *Blätter*, 14:11.

¹⁸ *Blätter*, 14:91.

¹⁹ *Blätter*, 14:182. The Athenaeum was at 73 Exchange Street. *Rice & Bell’s St. Paul City Directory for 1869–70*, 61.

The Athenaeum, built in 1859 by the German societies of St. Paul



tion and sincere enthusiasm. . . . the spirit and attitude of the audience left not the smallest thing to be desired." At Minneapolis an Easter ball and concert for the German people cut down attendance at his first speech, but at the second the hall was filled.²⁰

Journeying to New Ulm, Schünemann-Pott found the Sioux City Railroad tracks flooded by the Minnesota River. Although water destroyed the ferry, a small boat carried him into St. Peter. The drive across the prairie to New Ulm, however, was beautiful "because spring had begun to rule." During his New Ulm visit, the speaker made his headquarters at the Dakotah House. On his return to St. Paul for another lecture, he had to stay overnight in Mankato in order to avoid the floods. The New Ulm Transportation Company held back its boat, the "Otter," until he was ready to leave for Mankato. After spending the night, he traveled to St. Paul and in the evening addressed an audience there "who participated animatedly."²¹

After this 1870 visit to Minnesota, Schünemann-Pott did not return until 1873. In 1871 he accepted a call to become speaker for the San Francisco *Gemeinde* which he had helped to organize in 1870. Continuing to edit the *Blätter* from the West Coast until 1875, he kept in touch with events in Minnesota. He was encouraged to hear of the Free Thought Association organized in St. Paul in 1872 and published the new group's constitution, as well as Schröter's report.²²

In 1873, when Schünemann-Pott made his fifth and last visit to Minnesota on his way to Philadelphia, he had to report some discouraging signs of dying interest in free religion among the German Americans in

the state. "The Free Thought Association organized last year lacks a close organization and systematic work; so it scarcely leads a public life as yet. This is deplorable, since the count of the freethinking element among the German people of St. Paul is not small, as was strikingly evident upon the opportunity of my visit. I held three lectures . . . and each . . . was attended by numbers of men and women, and . . . favorably received in the fullest meaning of the word."

He had a suggestion for strengthening the *Gemeinde* in the Twin Cities: "Ought it not be possible to unite the friends in Minneapolis and St. Paul in a common organization, which would be strong enough to support a worthy speaker and create a living germ in order to unite the freethinking elements of the whole state?"²³

AFTER 1873 the *Blätter* carries no reports from Minnesota's Free Congregations or about the Free Thought Association. There are, however, later references to the state. In one instance, Schünemann-Pott announced that the Washington, D.C., *Gemeinde* had joined the *Bund* and asked "When will the new *Gemeinden* in Wisconsin and Minnesota follow their example?" And in 1884 the *Freidenker*, a Milwaukee newspaper, informed its readers that a lecture on "'Common Sense versus Orthodox Christianity' will be given on November 23 by Herr W. F. Jamieson of Minnesota."²⁴

Although organized free thought activity in Minnesota appears to have ended about 1875, there are fragments of evidence that indicate the movement was not entirely dead. In 1876 a group of Germans from Young America in Carver County moved to Otter Tail County where they cleared acres of hardwood and pioneered as farmers.²⁵ Some older citizens of the Vergas area remember from their childhood a loosely organized group of German freethinkers who met informally and never affiliated with the churches. Just southwest of Vergas, about a mile off county highway 4, is a Free Thought cemetery. The group's articles of

²⁰ *Blätter*, 14:182.

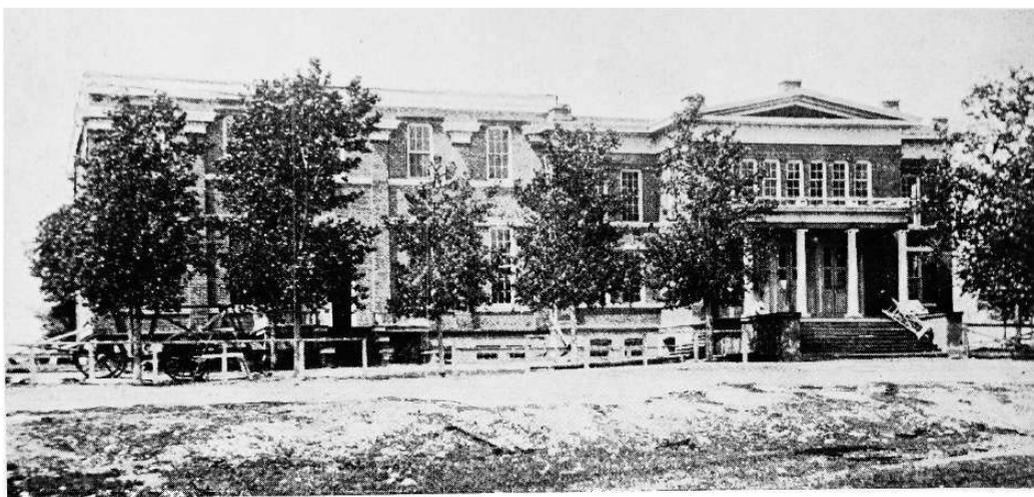
²¹ *Blätter*, 14:183. On the "Otter," see *Minnesota History*, 26:181 (June, 1945).

²² *Blätter*, 16:214-216 (May, 1872); 17:14-16.

²³ *Blätter*, 18:14.

²⁴ *Blätter*, 18:178 (March, 1874); *Freidenker* (Milwaukee), November 23, 1884.

²⁵ Frank Walde, "A New Home on Loon Lake," in *Gopher Historian*, 15 (Winter, 1962-63).



The Turner Hall at New Ulm

incorporation and its 1899 charter are recorded at Fergus Falls.²⁶

But the *Bund*, holding its national convention in Philadelphia in 1876, declared New Ulm to be either “dead or lost to the *Bund*.”²⁷ During the entire short history of the Free Congregations in Minnesota, there is no record of any group as strong as those in St. Louis, Philadelphia, Milwaukee, or Sauk City. The movement to organize was given impetus by Schünemann-Pott’s visits to Minnesota, but his disappointment over signs of declining interest in 1875 anticipates the disappearance of the *freien Gemeinden* from the state in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. None of Schünemann-Pott’s accounts gives even the approximate numbers of members in the societies organized in Minnesota during the period of his missionary lectures. Only the letters from Osseo and Medina mention the small number of their members—twelve and sixteen, respectively.

There are several probable reasons for the dissolution of these independent-thinking groups in the state’s German-American communities. Always a minority, they lacked the funds for full-time speakers who might have kept the congregations alive. Children and grandchildren of original members often married into orthodox church families and found it easier to accept affiliation with those churches as a matter of family unity. Furthermore, these denominations, like the Turnverein which functioned in many of

the German-American strongholds, offered more social life for young people than did a small society of freethinkers who met chiefly to hear lectures or to discuss philosophy and science. Another factor may have been the language barrier, for the children and grandchildren of German settlers often did not bother to learn the parental tongue.

Whatever the reasons for the short life of the Free Congregations, the movement deserves recognition as a part of the history of German pioneers in Minnesota, as well as the story of liberalism in the state. Its members spoke for freedom of the individual from authoritarianism in matters of religious belief. They were concerned that statements of such belief be consistent with new developments in science and history. In their difficult struggle to establish homes in the wilderness, these apostles of free religion cared about ideas. They helped to keep alive the intellectual and cultural heritage from their life in Germany and to foster it on a new frontier.

²⁶ Interviews by the author with Fritz Liebermann of Vergas, summer, 1962; “Index of Incorporations,” 41, in the office of the Register of Deeds, Otter Tail County Courthouse, Fergus Falls.

²⁷ *Geschichtliche Mittheilungen*, 74.

THE PICTURES on pages 54 and 55 are used by courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, respectively; all others are in the Minnesota Historical Society’s collection.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).