

PRAIRIE U-U AT THE SAUK CITY FREE CONGREGATION, Aug. 25, 1991

"CELEBRATING OUR GERMAN FREE THOUGHT HERITAGE"

Religion is a cultural universal. It evidently is a response to something universal in the human condition, and as such we ought to take religion seriously, even if we aren't religious ourselves.

But religion also tends to be a source of oppression. Sometimes the beliefs themselves can be enslaving, as when the primitive sacrifices before his idol, or the Christian punishes himself for fear of hell. Sometimes our neighbors, our social equals, try to force us to think and behave as they do. And sometimes hierarchical organizations, churches their priests and bishops, are the oppressors.

Oppression tends to lead to resistance. Resistance in the form of skeptical free thought movements is, unfortunately, NOT a cultural universal, but it is very common in the world civilizations. There is an aspect of the philosophers of ancient Athens that includes systematic skepticism about Greek religion. In Islam one had skeptics like Omar Khayyam as early as the 12th c. AD. I think it was slower coming in the Christian civilizations, but eventually we got traditions of free thinking in all the major European countries.

Today we are here to celebrate our German Free Thought Heritage --- our I should say heritages, since there is a plural number, and that represented by the Sauk City Free Congregation is just one of them. (But I am correct in referring to OUR German heritage: you don't have to be German to inherit German culture.) German Free Thought goes back a long way, and let's begin by singing a song that goes way back as well.

#1 "Die Gedanken Sind Frei" (Mike Briggs)

(I first heard this sung by Pete Seeger, whose version is probably responsible for its presence in the Prairie Song Book.)

The Sauk City Free Congregation has its roots in the Catholic Rhineland. I don't know if this Catholic heritage still has any effects on the culture of this group. One of our former members was brought up as a Catholic; he said he was a Unitarian, but a Catholic Unitarian. I could understand what he meant. But after a century and a half, that old inheritance has probably been somewhat diluted.

(Early history: read Demerath and Thiessen, AJS May 1966, pp. 677-678.....note the anniversary next year.

Read from "The Freie Gemeinde emerged...." to the end of para. 2, p. 678, col. 2, "... who would write things like that."

The founders of this community fled from Germany, and I don't know if there are any remaining Free Thought groups in the ~~Rhinex~~ Catholic Rhineland. There were important freethinkers among the Protestants as well, and among intellectuals. Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72) developed the idea that religion leads to human oppression quite systematically, and he argued that to achieve human freedom required that people learn the fallaciousness of religious ideas. David Strauss (1808-74) helped start modern ~~analyxxx~~ scientific analysis of the Bible with his LIFE OF JESUS in 1835, a book that led to his being dismissed from the University of Tübingen.

Another source of free thinking, not entirely different from those I have mentioned, was in the urban working classes. The established churches of Europe tended to support the upper classes, and as a result socialist movements in Europe tended to be <sup>direct</sup> against the church. I'm quite certain that this Sauk City community has <sup>no</sup> historical connection with such movements, being rural and middle or even upper class rather than working class.\* But it has indirect historical connections. And so I can use them to introduce some songs.

\* + even today  
politically conservative  
I'll bet.

Even in Germany the socialist anticlerical ideas weren't always Marxist, but they often were. Karl Marx was born in the Rhineland, the very city of Trier in 1818, and he was on the scene in the Rhineland when the movement leading to this congregation was developed. But Marx wasn't in the Catholic tradition. When his Jewish father converted to Christianity, he chose Protestant Christianity, perhaps because he wouldn't have to go to the same church as most of his neighbors. Marx was a freethinker before he was a socialist. He like the ideas of Ludwig Feuerbach as first. But later he became a materialist, arguing that you can't change people's religious ideas without first changing the material conditions of existence.

German socialism inspired the work of the musician we're interested in today, Kurt Weill.. Weill was Jewish, born in 1900. He was trained in

Aug. 91

3

classical music, by such well known composers as Humperdinck and Busoni. But by his ~~20~~ 20's, his socialist ideas led him to turn to writing music that would be directly accessible to the masses of the public. With the playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) he wrote a number of musicals in the 1920's, the best know of which are The Threepenny Opera and The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny. Here <sup>are two</sup> ~~is a~~ songs from the period:

#2 "Soldatenweib," Lee Burkholder accompanied by Mike Briggs.

#3 "Nanna's Lied" Dolez Chayve, Lee Burkholder accompanying

As a Jew and a socialist, Weill fled Germany when Hitler came to power in 1933. He first moved to Paris, then in 1935 to the United States. Thus he followed the founders of this Free Congregation into exile almost a century later.

Returning to the Sauk City Free Congregation: the source of my notes about this group is an article published in the AMERICAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY in 1966 by my friends Jay Demerath and Vick Thiessen. I don't know if members of the group are familiar with the paper; although the authors say that they showed a draft to some members of the group. . . . The message of the article ~~xxx~~ is given in its nifty title: "On spitting against the Wind: Organizational Precariousness and American Irreligion." The paper begins with this sentence: "This paper offers a belated diagnosis of an organization that is currently in its death trance," and at the ends ~~xxxxxx~~ states that the group is on the verge of disbanding. That was 25 years ago. It's interesting to ask why that sociological prediction was mistaken.

Demerath and Thiessen argued that being against religion is not really legitimate in modern American communities, a plausible claim. For example, we had people like Dwight D. Eisenhower who said that "I don't care what a man's religion is as long as he has one." Having illegitimate ideas leads to organizational precariousness. Organizations can respond either by increasing their militancy or by pursuing legitimation. Increasing militancy can lead members to burn their bridges behind them and increase commitment to the group. That's possible in a big city, where organizational differentiation and urban anonymity meant that one could be a militant atheist part of the time and a worker in a shop part of the

( Politics and culture: Just as Weill's politics led him to write accessible politics, other socialists were important in discovering the value of folk songs. The Unitarian Bela Bartok spent much of his life collecting the songs of Hungarian peasants. And in the U.S.)

time, and the two activities wouldn't come into conflict. It wasn't possible in a small community like Sauk City, where there isn't as much differentiation and anonymity. Thus the Milwaukee and Sauk City groups went in different directions.

(Quote pp. 678, "Indeed, with Schroeter's death...." to p. 679. "Free thought is neither big business nor....")

Weill also became less militant in the United States. He wrote music for Broadway and Hollywood. One of his Broadway musicals (....?) had a bizarre plot about a ~~woman~~ woman in psychotherapy. Yet he did not really abandon his early social ideas. Some of his ~~songs~~ songs were strikingly prophetic, like this one,

~~#4~~ #4, "The Margate Song," Lee Burkholder, Doleta Chapru accompanying

IR time, p 3a →

Demerath and Thiessen argued that the Free Congregation's attempt to become legitimate would not lead to its survival. Part of their argument was based on considerations of social status. In the 19th c., members of the Free Congregation had high status in the community. They had more in common with the old Bavarian ~~A&X~~ Catholics than the old Bavarian Catholics ~~xxx~~ had with the new lower-status ~~B~~ Prussian Catholics. High status people can afford to be ~~xxx~~ militant. Low status people can also afford to be militant, since they don't have much to lose. People of middle status are under most pressure to conform. They quote an informant who said that ~~xxx~~ around here "a tradesman can't afford to be anti-anything."

But the core of their argument has to do with the distinctive values and beliefs of freethought groups. Poorly defined values and goals lead to organizational precariousness. This is true in ordinary religious groups, "But if undefined and unattainable goals are a vulnerability of the churches, they are

Aug. 91

3a

In its debut, this might have been sung by Lotte Lenze.  
She was a singer who married Weill in 1926 and sang  
the leads in many of his musicals. She had ~~an~~<sup>a</sup>  
~~remarkable~~  
~~incredible~~ voice —

— and it was an interesting marriage. After Weill's  
death in 1950, she championed his music and played  
a leading role in the ~~first~~ very successful American  
adaptation of the Threepenny Opera.

Aug. 91

4

they are doubly so for the freethinkers. Here the problems escalate since values tend to be wholly relativistic and goals are rarely stipulated at all. The freethinker's high regard for individual autonomy makes an organizational creed anathema... with such vague goals, passion dissipates. There are no gauges by which to measure progress. There is little worth suffering for" (pp 684f)

I think this is where Demerath + Thiessen went wrong. Freedom and community are not incompatible. Having community support may be a necessary condition for individual freedom. Under some conditions, giving individuals the right to think for themselves may be a necessary condition for community: people like you and I would not belong to groups that would not give us such freedom, and increasingly that is true for others such as Catholics and Lutherans.

For, although the Pope doesn't recognize it, religious groups in most contemporary societies are voluntary associations. Respect for freedom will go along with tolerance of the beliefs of those in other groups. In the Rhineland in 1848 religion was not a voluntary association, and being a freethinker almost necessarily meant being militant. This isn't usually the case today.

Aug. 91

5

We may not have a creed, but we do have values. Our value of freedom is part of a package that includes tolerance and respect for the dignity of others. It goes along with our quest for equality.

Those values were there in some of our other German heritages as well. Kurt Weill was being true to himself when he wrote a musical about South Africa in 1940. This was "Lost in the Stars," based on Alan Paton's Cry the Beloved Country. Here is a song from it:

#5- "Speak Low," Barb Park accompanied by Aileen Nettleton