

## Secularism and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Germany

### *The Rise of the Fourth Confession*

Negotiating the boundaries of the secular and of the religious is a core aspect of modern experience. In mid–nineteenth-century Germany, secularism emerged to oppose church establishment, conservative orthodoxy, and national division among Catholics, Protestants, and Jews. Yet, as historian Todd H. Weir argues in this provocative book, early secularism was not the opposite of religion. It developed in the rationalist dissent of Free Religion and, even as secularism took more atheistic forms in Freethought and monism, it was subject to the forces of the confessional system it sought to dismantle. Similar to its religious competitors, it elaborated a clear worldview, sustained social milieus, and was integrated into the political system. Secularism was, in many ways, Germany’s fourth confession. While challenging assumptions about the causes and course of the *Kulturkampf* and modern antisemitism, this study casts new light on the history of popular science, radical politics, and social reform.

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TODD H. WEIR  
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Cover image: Lithograph (ca. 1847) showing the conflict between the Roman Catholic hierarchy and the three leaders of the breakaway German Catholic Church (1845), from left to right, former priests Johannes Czerski and Johannes Ronge, and newspaper editor Robert Blum. The German Catholic movement was the seedbed of Germany’s subsequent secularist organizations (courtesy of bpk).

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“Church Elder, ‘Too Scientific,’ Loses his Job.” Thus read a headline on the front page of the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* on March 19, 1915. The accompanying article described the expulsion of David Hamilton Weir from his local Presbyterian church for unorthodox religious views expressed while giving Bible instruction. My great-grandfather’s “heresy” of rationalist biblical interpretation and his earlier religious formation as a young man growing up in a confessionally divided town in northern Ireland echo two of the chief themes of this book. The paths that bring scholars to their subjects often originate in past family experience, and it may be that my great-grandfather had an indirect impact on me. However, I only learned of his experiences after this book was nearly complete. When I reflect on the people who sparked my curiosity about heterodox religious and political views and helped me develop the means to study them, I have to look to my own experience. First of all, I recall the far-ranging conversations across the dinner table with my parents, Tom and Kristi Weir, and my brother Brian. Second, I remember the communities of friends with whom I have shared a delight in critical inquiry, among them Sandor Katz, Pardis Barjesteh, Caroline Crumpacker, and Claudia Franz. Finally, I recognize the example set by inspired teachers, including Bob Mazelow, Lindsay Heather, Neil Lazarus, Andreas Huyssen, and Ludolf Herbst.

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Abbreviations

ADAV	Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiterverein
BBAW	Berlin-Brandenburg Akademie der Wissenschaften
CEH	Central European History
DFB	Deutscher Freidenkerbund
DGEK	Deutsche Gesellschaft für ethische Kultur
DMB	Deutscher Monistenbund
EHH	Ernst-Haeckel-Haus
FRC	Free Religious Congregation
GStA	Geheimes Staatsarchiv
LAB	Landesarchiv Berlin
SDAP	Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei
SED	Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands
UFRC	Union of Free Religious Congregations
USPD	Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands
VDAV	Verband Deutscher Arbeitervereine
VFF	Verein der Freidenker für Feuerbestattung
ZpF	Zentralverband proletarischer Freidenker

Time Line of Organized Secularism in Germany and Berlin

1841	Gnadau, Province of Saxony: Association of Protestant Friends (Beginning of <i>Lichtfreunde</i> )
1844	Schneidemühl, Pommerania: first Christkatholische Congregation (Beginning of <i>Deutschkatholizismus</i> )
1845	Berlin: Christkatholische Gemeinde Leipzig: First Council of Deutschkatholiken
1846	Königsberg: first Protestant Free Congregation
1859	Gotha: Union of Free Religious Congregations (Bund der Freireligiösen Gemeinden Deutschlands)
1862	Berlin: Christkatholische Congregation renamed Free Religious Congregation
1880	Brussels: International Federation of Freethinkers/Internationaler Freidenkerbund
1881	Frankfurt am Main: German Union of Freethinkers (Deutscher Freidenkerbund) Berlin: Freethought Association Lessing
1886/87	Berlin: Election of FRC board members sympathetic to the SPD, secession of minority to form the Humanist Congregation
1892	Berlin: German Society for Ethical Culture (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Ethische Kultur)
1900	Berlin: Giordano Bruno League
1905	Berlin: Association of Freethinkers for Cremation (Verein der Freidenker für Feuerbestattung)
1906	Jena: German Monist League (Deutscher Monistenbund)
1908	Eisenach: Central Union of German (later Proletarian) Freethought Associations (Zentralverband deutscher [proletarischer] Freidenkervereine)
1909	Weimar Cartel
1911	Berlin: Komitee Konfessionslos