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Debating 'Protestant Freedom' in Nineteenth-Century Germany

Theology, Politics and Natural Science

Todd H. Weir

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Summary

This essay examines the interplay of politics, science and theology in the debates over 'Protestant freedom' that took place in mid-nineteenth century Germany. It begins by tracing how rival factions of conservative, liberal, and radical clergy sought to mobilize the tradition of 'Protestant Freedom' during the period of ferment preceding the Revolution of 1848. The essay then turns to the 1860s to explore how church liberals argued for the compatibility of natural science and Protestantism. The final section picks up debates among radicals, who, on the eve of German unification in 1870, were divided over the question of whether the conscience, as defined in the Lutheran tradition, was compatible with scientific naturalism.

The fact that 'academic freedom' is today a cherished principle of university governance is an important, if indirect legacy of Martin Luther's theology, as expressed in the essay 'On the Freedom of a Christian' of 1520. The connection is to be found in the discussions that preceded the opening in 1810 of a new university in Berlin that went on to serve as the model for the modern research university worldwide. Two influential participants in these discussions were theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher and linguist and government official Wilhelm von Humboldt, both of whom insisted that scholars and students at the new university be guaranteed 'freedom of

teaching and learning'.¹ Given that this *Lehr- und Lernfreiheit* rested on the autonomy of the individual conscience, which many traced back to Luther and Calvin, academic freedom was understood to be largely synonymous with what was then called 'Protestant freedom'.

Although the ideal of academic freedom underlying the Berlin university contained an essentially optimistic vision of the future harmony of religion and science, for Schleiermacher at least, there was a potential hook. What if the natural sciences, freely preached from university lecterns, undermined the theological and epistemological foundations of the conscience, thereby robbing the human subject of its autonomy and agency? What if human morality became divorced from theology and was declared the product of social and biological evolution? At the end of his life, Schleiermacher recognized that developments in the sciences were posing these questions to the Protestant church and to modern culture. In 1829 he reflected upon them in a letter to a young theologian, Friedrich Lücke:

If you consider the contemporary state of the natural sciences, how they are developing ever more into a comprehensive knowledge of the world, of which until even recently one had little idea: what do you imagine of the future, I do not want to venture to say for theology, but for our Protestant Christianity? [...] If one could [...] fence oneself off against all criticisms from healthy research and erect inside an obedient church teaching, which would appear to all outside as a beingless ghost – but one they would nevertheless have to honor if they should ever want a proper burial – then one would not have to contend with anything that occurs in this field [of science, T.W.]. But we cannot and do not want that, and therefore we must make due with history as it has developed. And thus I cannot imagine anything other than that we must learn to get by without miracles, something that many are still in the habit of considering to be inseparable from the essence of Christianity.²

Schleiermacher stated that although he was too old to have to take a stand on these matters, the next generation of church leaders would. He asked: 'Do you want to hide yourselves behind these barricades and block yourselves off from science'? The result would be that science, starved of

1 H.-E. Tenorth, 'Eine Universität zu Berlin – Vorgeschichte und Einrichtung,' in H.-E. Tenorth (ed.), *Geschichte der Universität Unter den Linden. 1, Gründung und Blütezeit der Universität zu Berlin 1810-1918*, Oldenburg 2013, 3-76, 33.

2 F. Schleiermacher, 'Über die Glaubenslehre. Zwei Sendschreiben an Lücke,' in F. Schleiermacher, *Theologische-dogmatische Abhandlungen und Gelegenheitsschriften*, vol. 10, Berlin/New York 1990, 309-394, 345-46.

spiritual sustenance and cut off from the church 'must hoist the flag of disbelief! Should the knot of history become thus undone: Christianity with barbarism, and science with disbelief?'³

Schleiermacher's letter to Lücke has often been quoted because of its apparent prescience.⁴ At the time of its writing, German natural scientists were beginning to intrude into areas of culture previously dominated by philosophers and theologians.⁵ But shortly after Schleiermacher's death in 1834, a host of scientific claims arose with troubling consequences for Christian teaching. Physiologists like Rudolf Virchow, Hermann von Helmholtz and Emil du Bois-Reymond argued in the 1840s that only mechanical explanations of bodily functions were allowed in human biology, leaving no room for actions of the divine. Wilhelm von Humboldt's brother, Alexander, proposed in *Kosmos*, his bestseller of 1845, that natural science could form the basis for a unified and total understanding of the universe or, as it was then becoming known, a new 'worldview'.⁶

The challenges posed by natural science led to major ruptures across the Christian world. The Vatican condemned in the *Syllabus Errorum* of 1864 the idea that natural science could explain theological or moral matters. In Britain theological debates heated up in the wake of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. These spilled over into the United States, where in the early twentieth century the struggle over evolution played into the widening divisions between fundamentalist and liberal wings of several Protestant denominations.⁷

By contrast, if judged by the lack of attention given to natural science in the accounts of many German theologians, one might conclude that scientific naturalism had little traumatic impact on nineteenth-century German Protestantism.⁸ Indeed, according to Tilman Schröder, university theologians as a group had little trouble with natural science.⁹ In the wake of Kant

3 Schleiermacher, 'Über die Glaubenslehre', 347.

4 R. Bigler, *The Politics of German Protestantism: The Rise of the Protestant Church Elite in Prussia, 1815-1848*, Berkeley etc. 1972, 169.

5 H. Schnädelbach, *Philosophie in Deutschland 1831-1933*, Frankfurt a. M. 1983.

6 A. von Humboldt, *Kosmos: Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung*, Stuttgart/Tübingen 1845, xii, iv, xiii.

7 G.M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, New York 2006, 141-83.

8 K. Barth, *Die protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert: Ihre Vorgeschichte und ihre Geschichte*, Zürich 1947.

9 T.M. Schröder, *Naturwissenschaften und Protestantismus im Deutschen Kaiserreich: die Versammlungen der Gesellschaft Deutscher Naturforscher und Ärzte und ihre Bedeutung für die evangelische Theologie*, Stuttgart 2008.

and Schleiermacher, many had come to adopt *Vermittlungstheologie* (theology of mediation), which sought to harmonize biblical revelation with historical and natural science.¹⁰ They implicitly affirmed Schleiermacher's sentiment that such a harmonization was the only way to keep Protestantism and with it German culture from foundering on the shoals of either dogmatic orthodoxy or scientific atheism.

A unique aspect of nineteenth-century German Protestantism was its preoccupation with theological reflection. These were, in historian Thomas Nipperdey's words, 'churches of theologians'.¹¹ Yet, despite their influence, not least as authors of church histories, professors of theology did not monopolize the debates over the relationship of natural science to 'Protestant freedom'. Outside the walls of the university, these debates sometimes grew fierce and played important roles in the formation of factions and schisms. The aim of this essay is to recover some of these debates and explore their contribution to ecclesiastical and political developments between the period leading up to revolution of 1848 and German unification in 1870/1. Although a number of the protagonists occupied university chairs, they are examined here as polemicists in popular theological and political controversies. Thus the essay finds its sources in newspaper editorials and pamphlets, as well as in reports on public meetings and ecclesiastical trials. It draws on the author's past research into radical currents within the German church history, and hence privileges the viewpoint of rationalist Protestant dissenters.¹²

The essay comprises three sections. The first focuses on church politics and examines the role played by the notion of 'Protestant freedom' in the formation of rival factions of conservative, liberal, and radical clergy during the *Vormärz*, that period of ferment leading up the failed revolution of 1848. The second section turns to the problem of natural science in the decade of liberal triumphalism and growing nationalism in the 1860s. It explores how church liberals and radicals sought to mobilize the power of natural science to support their rival claims to best represent the tradition of freedom of conscience. The final section picks up debates among radicals, who, on the eve of German unification, were divided over the question of whether the conscience, as defined in the Lutheran tradition, was compatible with scientific naturalism.

10 Z. Purvis, *Theology and the University in Nineteenth-Century Germany*, Oxford 2017, 139-165.

11 T. Nipperdey, *Religion im Umbruch: Deutschland 1870-1918*, Munich 1988, 67.

12 T. Weir, *Secularism and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Germany: The Rise of the Fourth Confession*, New York 2014.

Vormärz politics and 'Protestant freedom'

Schleiermacher published his letter to Dr. Lücke in order to address an emerging rift in the Protestant church, in which the meaning of 'Protestant freedom' was hotly disputed. Christian rationalists, centered at the University of Halle, believed that freedom of conscience entitled them to abandon the recitation of confessional creeds in their church services.¹³ Opposition to this rationalism contributed to the foundation of a new mouthpiece for church conservatives in 1827, the *Evangelische Kirchenzeitung*. The paper became most associated with Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg, a Berlin theology professor famous for his invective.¹⁴ When Magdeburg pastor Wilhelm Franz Sintenis (1794-1859) claimed that the worship of the cross was idolatrous in 1840, the *Evangelische Kirchenzeitung* promised a struggle that 'will not be ended until the evil consequences of rationalism, liberal *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of revolt and freethought (*Freigeisterei*) are destroyed'.¹⁵

Galvanized by the subsequent episcopal censorship of Pastor Sintenis, rationalists met in a town outside of Madgeburg in June 1841 to form a support association. They called themselves 'Protestant Friends', but became better known by the name given by their detractors: the 'Friends of Light' or *Lichtfreunde*. It is no coincidence that the Lichtfreunde organized in the wake of the coronation in that year of Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV, the 'pietist on the throne', who appointed conservatives to key positions in the Protestant Church. According to the leader of the Lichtfreunde, pastor Leberecht Uhlich (1799-1872), the king's involvement in the Sintenis case proved there was a 'will to cleanse the Protestant Church of its free elements. It was thus time to prepare for struggle'.¹⁶

13 H. Rosenberg, 'Theologischer Rationalismus und vormärzlicher Vulgärliberalismus', in idem., *Politische Denkströmungen im deutschen Vormärz*, Göttingen 1972, 18-50.

14 H.-J. Gabriel, 'Im Namen des Evangeliums gegen den Fortschritt. Zur Rolle der "Evangelischen Kirchenzeitung" unter E.W. Hengstenberg von 1830 bis 1849', in G. Wirth (ed.), *Beiträge zur Berliner Kirchengeschichte*, Berlin 1987, 154-76; M. Friedrich, *Die preußische Landeskirche im Vormärz: Evangelische Kirchenpolitik unter dem Ministerium Eichhorn (1840-1848)*, Waltrop 1994; M. Lamberti, 'Lutheran Orthodoxy and the Beginning of Conservative Party Organization in Prussia', *Church History* 37 (1968), 439-53; D. Barclay, *Frederick William IV and the Prussian Monarchy 1840-1861*, Oxford 1995.

15 Quoted in Bigler, *Politics*, 78.

16 Quoted in C. Thierbach, *Gustav Adolf Wislicenus: Ein Lebensbild aus der Geschichte der freien, religiösen Bewegung (zu seinem 100jährigen Geburtstag)*, Leipzig 1904, 23.

In their polemics against the 'pietists', church liberals and radicals supported the right of each church minister and believer to 'freedom of teaching and learning [*Lehr- und Lernfreiheit*]' rooted in the inviolable individual conscience.¹⁷ They raised the toleration of heterodoxy into a particularly Prussian and Protestant virtue and never became tired of quoting Friedrich the Great's dictum that every Prussian should be allowed to seek 'salvation according to his own *façon*'.¹⁸ Conservatives meanwhile saw 'Protestant freedom' as constrained by a correct understanding of the Gospels and submission to authority.

The conflict between the Prussian state church and the Lichtfreunde escalated in spring 1845, when the church sought to impose the Apostles' Creed on a recalcitrant radical minister, Gustav Wislicenus. An anonymous brochure warned: 'Protestants, someone wants to touch your holiest treasure! Someone wants to rob you of your freedom of belief and conscience! [...] Look, a few old believers have built a Vatican in the middle of the Protestant Church!'¹⁹

On 1 August 1845, three hundred Berliners demonstrated publicly in support of the Lichtfreunde. They resolved that: 'Freedom of conscience and teaching is the recognized basis of true human education and the only guarantee of its further development [...] Against this a certain party pursues [...] only hierarchical purposes, unsettles the conscience, promotes a hypocrisy that destroys morality, accuses and persecutes those who think differently and attempts to expel them and treat them as sectarians'.²⁰ Two weeks later, a diverse coalition of 87 liberal Protestant church leaders issued a public 'Berlin Declaration' against the orthodox 'party' around the *Evangelische Kirchenzeitung* that was 'striving for domination within the church'. The attempt to enforce a binding confession contradicted the Protestant freedom of conscience, and the Declaration warned that '[t]he danger is there that the Protestant Church will explode in many directions'. Because the signatories included two bishops, the Declaration

17 'Lehr- und Lernfreiheit' were central demands in the Lichtfreunde protests of 1845: J. Berends, *Keine Gewissensfreiheit ohne Lehrfreiheit in der Kirche*, Berlin 1845; K. Wernicke, 'Julius Berends (1814-1891)', in H. Bleiber et alii (ed.) *Akteure eines Umbruchs: Männer und Frauen der Revolution von 1848-49*, vol. 1, Berlin 2003, 83-138; T. Volkart, *Zur Verständigung. Aus der Vossischen Zeitung*, n.a. 1845.

18 This saying is quoted in a police report on a meeting of the Berlin Freethinkers' Association Lessing in 1883 (Landesarchiv Berlin, A Pr. Br. Rep. 30, Tit. 95, Nr 15130, 125) and in D.F. Strauß, *Der alte und der neue Glaube. Ein Bekenntnis*, Bonn 1873, 295.

19 Geheimes Staatsarchiv (GStA) Berlin, I HA, Rep. 77, Tit. 416, no. 37, vol. 2, 88.

20 1,569 Berliners signed the petition. GStA, I HA, Rep 77, Abt. I, Tit. 416, no. 34, 2.

unleashed an acrimonious debate among officials and lay members of the Protestant Church.²¹

On August 22 the Berlin city government intervened and asked the King to take action against Hengstenberg's 'party' that was drifting towards the 'Catholic worldview'. They argued that Christianity was 'continually renewing itself in the souls of men' and that it reflected 'the development of the human spirit in history through new forms'.²² Such argumentation was typical of the way German liberals utilized their interpretation of Protestant freedom to score points against the conservatives. Karl Theodor Welcker, one of Germany's foremost constitutional scholars and son of a Lutheran minister, argued that the essential achievement of Protestantism had been to liberate the human spirit from the bondage of dogmatism. Political liberty became possible and necessary with the evolution of the ethical autonomy of the free Christian individual. Church and State played important roles in this development but only indirectly (*mittelbar*). Too much interference blocked the growth of liberty.²³

By supporting the right to dissent, liberals could profile themselves as defenders of Protestant freedom.²⁴ At the same time, however, the rift between the state church and the radicals was threatening. When the King forced the radical Protestants out of the church with a decree in 1847 he effectively put Lichtfreunde before the choice of either accepting church authority or forming their own congregations. Only seven congregations broke off from the Protestant State Church of Prussia by 1847, including congregations in Königsberg, Breslau, Halle, Nordhausen, Magdeburg and Halberstadt. This split the Lichtfreunde movement in two. The most radical leaders founded what were known as 'free congregations' and those that chose to remain were cowed into submission and forced to accept the Apostles' Creed.²⁵

This experience further exacerbated tensions between liberals and radicals. Liberals like Welcker opposed the theological heroes of the radicals,

21 The Berlin Declaration reprinted in: Friedrich Julius Stahl, *Zwei Sendschreiben an die Unterzeichner der Erklärung vom 15., beziehungsweise 26. August 1845, zugleich als ein Votum in der Augsburgischen Confessions-Frage*, Berlin 1845, 3-4.

22 D. W. Dietlein, *Die Berliner Erklärung vom 15. August 1845 und deren Literatur*, Berlin 1846, 4, 6, 9.

23 A. Jansson, 'Revolution and Revelation: Theology in the Political Thought of Friedrich Julius Stahl, Wilhelm Weitling and Karl Theodor Welcker', PhD Diss., University of Gothenburg, 2017.

24 D. Herzog, *Intimacy and Exclusion: Religious Politics in Pre-Revolutionary Baden*, Princeton 1996.

25 Weir, *Secularism and Religion*, 48.

D. F. Strauß and Ludwig Feuerbach, because their teachings threatened the continuity of the Protestant church, which Welcker saw as the ever renewing source of ethical development. Christianity was responsible not only for past but also for future progress. 'In all of its outer appearance', he wrote, 'in its provisions as in its progressing development and realization, Christianity speaks for this great law of constantly rising, freer, higher, and richer development of the human race and the necessary downfall of those states, classes and dynasties, which according to the necessary life-law of general progress by their very standing still give themselves to regression'.²⁶

Thus, by 1847, conflicts over the definition of Protestant freedom had contributed to division of the church into clearly articulated conservative, liberal and radical factions. These contributed directly to the formation of political factions of the Revolution the following year. Leading representatives of each church faction played crucial roles in the revolutionary parliaments in Frankfurt and Berlin. Whereas Hengstenberg blasted what he saw as the atheist essence of the Revolution, Welcker supported the creation of a constitutional monarchy. Several Catholic and Protestant dissenting pastors played prominent roles in the radical wing of the Frankfurt Parliament and the subsequent insurrectionary movements of 1849.²⁷

Liberal triumphalism and natural science in the 1860s

In order to examine the way in which developments in natural science impinged upon debates over Protestant freedom, we turn to the decade following the political thaw of 1859, when liberals were allowed to reorganize across the German states. This was a period of liberal ascendancy and patriotic fervor, as epitomized in the names of the two leading Prussian political parties of the 1860s, the German Progressive Party and the National-Liberal Party. Many, if not most liberals in the 1860s saw no opposition between science and Protestantism, rather the two were depicted as mutually supportive pillars upon which would be built the future German culture and

²⁶ As quoted in: Jansson, 'Revolution and Revelation', 177.

²⁷ F.W. Graf, *Die Politisierung des religiösen Bewußtseins. Die bürgerlichen Religionsparteien im deutschen Vormärz: Das Beispiel des Deutschkatholizismus*, Stuttgart 1978; A. Holzem, *Kirchenreform und Sektenstiftung. Deutschkatholiken, Reformkatholiken und Ultramontane am Oberrhein (1844-1856)*, Paderborn 1994; J. Brederlow, 'Lichtfreunde' und 'Freie Gemeinden': *Religiöser Protest und Freiheitsbewegung im Vormärz und in der Revolution von 1848-49*, Munich 1976.

nation. The liberal harmonization of natural science and theology may surprise latter-day observers given the heat produced by the 'materialism controversy' in the 1850s, when radical natural scientists, such as Karl Vogt and Ludwig Büchner, declared that the existence of a transcendent sphere and with it Christianity could no longer be supported in an age of empirical natural science.²⁸

Protestant liberals employed two strategies of harmonization. The first was to claim that scientific and historical discovery were themselves products of the Protestant Reformation. This allowed Protestants to depict scientific attacks on Christian dogma as outgrowths of Lutheranism. Luther, according to early twentieth-century theologian Arthur Titius, may have still believed in miracle, but 'the Reformation laid the axe at the root of faith in miracles'.²⁹ Modern science, in other words, was fulfilling a promise contained within Lutheran spirituality that Luther himself could not have perceived. The same applied to history. Martin Kähler (1835-1912) wrote that his generation of German Protestants had been able to take Darwinism in stride because they were already committed to evolution in thought via Hegel.³⁰

The idea that Protestantism and science were closely intertwined gained additional plausibility during the wave of intense anti-Catholicism that swept Europe during the 1860s and accompanied the liberal unification movements in Germany and Italy.³¹ The Swiss-German theologian Daniel Schenkel had helped found the *Protestantenverein* in 1865, an anti-Catholic association of dedicated liberal, nationalist Protestants. In a pamphlet entitled *Protestantische Freiheit* published in the same year, Schenkel described the contemporary period as 'a struggle to the death between two mutually exclusive worldviews and spiritual directions'. On the one side stood 'the Catholic-Jesuitical party of reaction' that sought the 'suppression of the

28 F.A. Lange, *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart*, Frankfurt a. M. 1974; F. Gregory, *Scientific Materialism in Nineteenth Century Germany*, Dordrecht 1977.

29 A. Titius, *Natur und Gott; ein Versuch zur Verständigung zwischen Naturwissenschaft und Theologie*, Göttingen, 1931, 841.

30 M. Kähler, *Geschichte der protestantischen Dogmatik im 19. Jahrhundert*, Munich 1962, 100.

31 M. Gross, *The War against Catholicism: Liberalism and Anti-Catholic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Germany*, Ann Arbor 2004; M. Borutta, *Antikatholizismus: Deutschland und Italien im Zeitalter der europäischen Kulturkämpfe*, Göttingen 2010; M.L. Anderson, 'Interdenominationalism, Clericalism, Pluralism: The Zentrumsstreit and the Dilemma of Catholicism in Wilhelmine Germany,' *Central European History* 21, 1988, 350-78.

modern spirit, which had been freed by the Reformation'. On the other side was Protestantism, which Schenkel defined as

the free self-determination of nations and individuals, starting in the inner root of their personality, the conscience and faith, in the part of the person turned toward the eternal and infinite. We understand therein also free self-determination in all directions of public life, in state and society, in morality and law, in science and culture. It is, in fact, a new world – this Protestant world.³²

This line of reasoning was also affirmed by liberal scientists, even those who had essentially left their Protestant piety behind, such as Rudolf Virchow. In the very speech in the Prussian Parliament in which he first popularized the term 'Kulturkampf' in January 1873, this leading liberal and natural scientist described scientific culture as a project that had begun in Christianity and had been carried to its highest religious level by the Protestant Reformation. But once the church fell into dogmatism, its role as 'true bearer of the entirety of human development' had passed to 'the scientific laity'. Virchow cast from himself accusations that he was a 'materialist' bent on imposing his creed on the public. His goals were merely 'freedom of individual religious conscience' and 'the emancipation of the state'.³³ When orthodoxy, now principally identified with the Catholic Church, tried to hinder freethinking, Virchow believed that it betrayed the development of the human spirit that early Christianity had set in motion.

The second strategy for harmonizing science and theology was offered by the Kantian model of cognition, which held that metaphysical and empirical knowledge did not coincide. Writing in 1868, Schenkel argued that if Christians would abandon their dogmatic claims, then 'religious truths' would become 'entirely independent of scientific findings. Once this proposition is accepted within the church, peace will be made between Christianity and culture.'³⁴ The strategy was also appealing to natural scientists, like Berlin physiologist Emil du Bois-Reymond, who were eager to

32 D. Schenkel, *Die protestantische Freiheit in ihrem gegenwärtigen Kampfe mit der kirchlichen Reaktion: eine Schutzschrift*, Wiesbaden 1865, 5. On the Protestantenverein, see G. Hübinger, *Kulturprotestantismus und Politik: Zum Verhältnis von Liberalismus und Protestantismus im wilhelminischen Deutschland*, Tübingen 1994, 138-48.

33 Quoted in G. Franz, *Kulturkampf: Staat und Katholische Kirche in Mitteleuropa von der Säkularisation bis zum Abschluss des preussischen Kulturkampfes*, Munich 1954, 9-10. On Virchow, see C. Goschler, *Rudolf Virchow: Mediziner, Anthropologe, Politiker*, Cologne 2002.

34 D. Schenkel, *Der Deutsche Protestantenverein und seine Bedeutung in der Gegenwart*, Wiesbaden 1868, following the translation of Thomas Dunlop found at:

push back against those who were trying to turn science into a worldview. In 1872 du Bois-Reymond gave a famous speech at the annual conference of scientists and physicians in which he demanded that there should be limits to scientific inquiry. Some questions were simply not open to empirically verifiable, quantitative, mechanical explanations; hence their investigation did not belong to the realm of natural science. He thereby made room for separation of science and the disciplines concerned with culture.³⁵

Thus, while focusing their fire on Catholic ultramontanist, secular and religious liberals also aimed darts at their enemies on the left. Political and theological radicals responded by attacking the liberal harmonization strategy and demanded greater concessions from Protestant theology. In a polemic against Schenkel and Hengstenberg written in 1865 with the title 'Halves and Wholes', D. F. Strauß stated that he preferred strong characters who were wrong, like Hengstenberg, over those who were half wrong, like Schenkel, because only a 'whole person' could have integrity as an ethical subject and because the half wrong were harder to lead to truth than the wholly wrong. Strauß held that the half-truths propagated by mediation theology were ultimately a dishonest attempt to save the church from the whole truth demanded by science: 'Only complete submission to the forward-driving train of time, [only] serious and honest action upon its tasks can still educate whole men in our time.'³⁶

Strauß accused Schenkel of hypocrisy. Schenkel extolled the free spirit, but when science contradicted religion, Schenkel used the authority granted him by his university and church offices to limit science. As a case in point, Strauß reminded readers of Schenkel's opposition to the dissenting rationalists in the Vormärz and of his effort to prevent the 'atheist' philosopher Kuno Fischer from taking a chair in Heidelberg in 1852. According

(http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=457, last access: April 10, 2018). On Neo-Kantianism, see K.C. Köhnke, *The Rise of Neo-Kantianism: German Academic Philosophy between Idealism and Positivism*, Cambridge 1991.

35 Emil du Bois-Reymond, 'The Limits of our Knowledge of Nature,' *Popular Scientific Monthly* V (1874), 17-32; K. Bayertz, *Weltanschauung, Philosophie und Naturwissenschaft im 19. Jahrhundert*, Hamburg 2007; H. Lübke, 'Wissenschaft und Weltanschauung: Ideenpolitische Fronten im Streit um Emil Du Bois-Reymond,' in H. Lübke (ed.), *Die Aufdringlichkeit der Geschichte: Herausforderung der Moderne vom Historismus bis zum Nationalsozialismus*, Graz etc. 1989, 257-74; T. Weir, 'The Riddles of Monism: An Introductory Essay,' in T. Weir (ed.), *Monism: Science, Philosophy, Religion and the History of a Worldview*, New York 2012, 1-44.

36 D.F. Strauß, *Die Halben und die Ganzen: eine Streitschrift gegen die HH. DD. Schenkel und Hengstenberg*, Berlin 1865, unpaginated.

to Strauß, Schenkel justified the sacrifice of the principle of 'Lehrfreiheit' in cases such as Fischer's, 'where Christianity is attacked at its foundations in public lectures'.³⁷

Ultimately, Strauß believed that Schenkel was afraid of the conclusions of natural science because they radically challenged the theological core of Christianity, i.e., the incarnation of Christ as a god-man and his resurrection:

Christianity [...] stands or falls with the resurrection of Christ; yes, given that [the resurrection, T. W.] has been denied equally by historical and natural science (one just has to ask around with its most honest and sober representatives!), it has already fallen. One asks oneself: is Christianity itself so intertwined with this figure, or better with the totality of its previous configurations, that to relinquish it would mean renunciation of Christianity? [...] What can already be confirmed is this: If Christianity is truth, it cannot require any untruths for its support; whatever part requires such support is not the truth, but rather the error of [Christianity, T.W.]; whatever remains, when these supports and their supported errors fall, – and we believe that something and not little remains – only that is the truth of Christianity. To this remainder comes the choice, whether it wants to stand with its truth by pulling together or perish with its untruth, if it cannot separate itself from it.³⁸

In other words, according to Strauß, 'Protestant freedom' meant resolutely adhering to scientific progress and accepting what it might mean for Protestant theology. Although he stated that what remained of the 'truth of Christianity' was 'not little', he did not venture to say of what this residual Christianity consisted. This silence covered a looming crisis for radical Protestants, namely how to justify freedom of conscience within a natural scientific paradigm.

The theological stakes had been made clear by Schenkel in his two-volume treatise, *Die christliche Dogmatik vom Standpunkte des Gewissens aus dargestellt*, published in 1859. Schenkel held that scientific materialism denied the existence of the free will and hence of the conscience. According to Schenkel, the structure of the conscience mirrored within the human soul the individual's relation to the God as mediated by the incarnation of Christ:

³⁷ Strauß, *Die Halben und die Ganzen*, 5.

³⁸ Strauß, *Die Halben und die Ganzen*, 128.

The religious is a special capacity of the human spirit. The organ thereof is the conscience, in which the consciousness of God is originally and immediately given, both in the consciousness of a being of God in us, as well as of our no longer being in God. Accordingly, the conscience is the central organ of the human spirit and at the same time its central ethical organ, and the synthesis of the religious and the ethical factors is originally contained in the conscience.³⁹

It is telling that Schenkel refers here to the conscience as an 'organ', a word choice that indicates the pressure of natural science upon theology. The problem of the relationship of the divine and the physical in the conscience, as here presented by Schenkel, would come to occupy radical Protestants as well. Whereas Strauß remained silent on the issue of the conscience, the former *Lichtfreunde* did not. It is with their debates on the subject that this article will conclude.

Debates over 'the conscience' among radical former Protestants around 1870

Having been driven from the Prussian Protestant Church in and around 1847, the most radical *Lichtfreunde* joined forces with the much more numerous Catholic rationalist dissenters, who had become known as the *Deutschkatholiken* (German Catholics). As a result of the repression following the revolution, the total membership of the Protestant and Catholic dissenting congregations, which probably reached 100,000 to 150,000 in 1848, dropped to perhaps 30,000 by 1859. With the political thaw of that year, they regrouped and formed the Union of Free Religious Congregations (UFRC). Because many *Deutschkatholisch* congregations had recruited young Protestant pastors and theology students to lead them in the 1840s, the intellectual leadership of the UFRC was largely comprised of former Protestant clergymen.⁴⁰

During the late 1840s and the 1850s, many of these men had come to see natural scientific monism rather than Christian revelation as the foundation of their new 'worldview'. Initially they saw no conflict between belief in the free action of the spirit advocated by members of the Hegelian left, like D.F. Strauß and Ludwig Feuerbach, and the belief that their worldview was fully compatible with naturalistic explanations of human motivations

39 D. Schenkel, *Die christliche Dogmatik vom Standpunkte des Gewissens aus dargestellt*, 1. Bd., *Die Lehrgrundlegung*, Wiesbaden 1858.

40 Weir, *Secularism and Religion*, 66-104.

and actions. However, during the national debate in the years between 1868 and 1870 over efforts to make naturalistic monism the binding creed for Free Religion, the nature of the conscience became a point of difference that pitted an older generation comprising former ministers (now called 'preachers') trained in Protestant seminaries, against a younger generation of former Protestants trained as school teachers or physicians.⁴¹

The debate was triggered by the call of the executive council of the UFRC in 1868 to move forward with a petition by Leberecht Uhlich for a 'simple and clear expression' of Free Religion for the wider public. The proposed declaration that 'religion is nothing other than the life of the conscience in man himself' was rejected by the preacher of the Free Protestant Congregation in Königsberg, Julius Rupp, who saw in it a 'confession' and hence an infringement of the principle of freedom of conscience. Rupp also saw in the formulation a subordination of the human conscience to biology. He warned the delegates in Berlin that if the Free Religious 'are ruled by the idea that human life in its entirety is nothing but an extension of the mechanism of nature, then ethical religious communities would be made impossible'.⁴²

The majority of the congress delegates chose to disregard Rupp's objection and voted to back the executive board and the declaration of principles.⁴³ However, when the congress entrusted its new national journal *Menschentum* (Humanity) to the hands of Fritz Schütz, a young preacher of the Free Religious Congregation of the Thuringian town of Apolda, it sowed the seeds for a more decisive intellectual split in the movement.⁴⁴

In his programmatic statement of April 1869, Schütz demanded that the Union adopt a single creed, to be produced by 'gathering the noblest ideas and ambitions of our century into a unified foundational view (*Grundanschauung*) like a focal point, a harmonious, shining and warming whole, and from this innermost point to attempt to explain, encourage and

41 Physician Carl Boruttau went on to pen some of the key early texts on religious policy for the young Social Democratic movement: S. Prüfer, 'Ethischer Sozialismus vor 1890: Der Arzt und Sozialdemokrat Carl Boruttau (1837-1873),' *IWK* 35 (1999), 327-48. Former teacher G. S. Schäfer was a long-time leader of Germany's largest Free Religious Congregation. G.S. Schaefer, *Vernunftgemäße Lebensbetrachtungen vom Standpunkte des Naturalismus und Sozialismus nach Vorträgen in der FRG gehalten von dem Sprecher derselben*, Berlin 1881.

42 *Verhandlungen bei Schließung des Bundes Freireligiöser Gemeinden*. Gotha, 16., 17. Juni 1859, 41; Rupp quoted in G. Tschirn, *Zur 60jährigen Geschichte der freireligiösen Bewegung*, Gottesberg 1904, 98.

43 Tschirn, *Geschichte*, 98-101.

44 F. Schütz, *Unsterblichkeit*, 1882, IV-VI.

brighten life in all of its directions'. Only empirical natural science, Schütz argued, could provide this worldview.⁴⁵

The strongest opposition to Schütz's proposed course came from those Free Religious congregations that still adhered to Christianity. Darmstadt Preacher Wilhelm Hieronymi ridiculed Schütz for presuming that his views were more modern. Had someone stood up in the 1840s and said 'friends, you don't know what you want, I am bringing you a new "religious foundation"', Hieronymi wrote, 'we would have just laughed at him, because we were familiar with all of the ideas driving modernity. [...] The "religious-moral worldview" you mention was and is well known to us all, just like the physical-scientific worldview of modernity'. It was not scientific dogmatism but only freedom that could unite the Free Religious, he argued.⁴⁶

Schütz's proposal not only upset those who understood themselves as Christian, but also the Free Religious leaders who adhered to a pantheistic, idealistic versions of monism. This became apparent in the debate over the nature of the conscience. Both pantheists and naturalists could agree that 'religion is nothing other than the life of the conscience in man himself'. However, depending on whether they conceived of the human as essentially spiritual or as essentially biological, they arrived at different conclusions regarding the autonomy of the conscience. According to Schütz, it was false to conceive of conscience 'as... an inner voice, for which we are not obliged to give account'. Instead 'our entire private and public life should be guided by the conscience' understood as 'science and understanding'.⁴⁷ In other words, conscience was to obey the dictates of a moral system derived from the laws of natural science.

Schütz's provocation led many of the best-known Free Religious leaders in Germany to defend the inviolability of the individual conscience. They rooted its autonomy in 'feeling' (Andreas Reichenbach), 'holiness' (Karl Schrader), in the 'unknowability' of the conscience (Eduard Baltzer), or in its independence from the temporal order (Leberecht Uhlich).⁴⁸ Given the wide acceptance of the explanatory power of natural science, having to ground their definitions of the conscience in the 'unknowable' placed these preachers in an uncomfortable position. Schütz pushed them hard on

45 F. Schütz, 'Das Gewissen, die Art seiner Thätigkeit und seine religiös-sittliche Bedeutung,' *Menschenhum. Blätter für freies religiöses Leben der Menschheit*, vol. 1 (1869), 3-7, 16-31, 33-39, 59-79, quotation 79.

46 'Meinungsaustausch,' *Menschenhum*, vol. 1 (1869), 91-92.

47 Schütz, 'Gewissen,' 79.

48 'Meinungsaustausch,' 91-92.

this point. For if ‘the capacities and activities of the conscience’ remained unexplainable, the conscience might become ‘the seat of habits, superstition, prejudices, egotism and hypocritical considerations, and will not help the world’. If the conscience ‘steps into the light of public knowledge and justifies itself from there, then it will also create a renewed modern morality through modern science, and, just as it shows the way to salvation [*Heil*], it will also bring salvation to the peoples in all life spheres. The life path of the Free Religious direction’, he concluded, ‘can only follow this latter course’.⁴⁹

This debate over the conscience marked a parting of ways over the meaning of Protestant freedom in the radical camp. On one side, those younger naturalists advocating a positive faith based in natural science were willing to abandon the notion of absolute religious freedom that was the sole doctrinal paragraph of the 1859 charter of the UFRC. On the other side were the theologically trained preachers of the first generation, who wanted to retain a paradoxical definition of the conscience as a human faculty that was compatible with but not exhausted by mechanical laws of nature.

The stakes of this debate were high. According to a prominent member of the older generation, the Berlin preacher A. T. Wislicenus, the chief accomplishment of Free Religion had been the transformation, for the first time in history, of the promise of ‘Protestant freedom’ into a lived ‘truth’. Defining the essence of Free Religion as the ‘interiority of the soul [*Gemüth*] and the entire freedom of thought’, Wislicenus warned in 1865 against any new ‘submission to a revelation’.⁵⁰ Such rejection of dogma and interiorization of religion were characteristic of nineteenth-century liberal Protestant piety as whole, according to historian Lucian Hölscher.⁵¹ The turn to naturalistic monism challenged this trend. The difference is reflected in a forum in pages of *Menschenhum* over the relationship that the Free Religious Congregations should take to Schenkel’s Protestantenverein. Wislicenus’s allies wanted to keep channels open to these church liberals, whereas Schütz and his confederates took a cue from Strauß and mocked the Protestantenverein for its half-truths, its ‘Halbheit’.⁵² It is not surprising that the naturalists not

49 ‘Meinungsaustausch,’ 91–92.

50 A. T. Wislicenus, *Vortrag am Stiftungsfeste der freireligiösen Gemeinde zu Berlin, den 19. März 1865*, Berlin 1865, 5, 6.

51 L. Hölscher, ‘The Religious Divide: Piety in Nineteenth-Century Germany,’ in H.W. Smith (ed.), *Protestants, Catholics and Jews in Germany, 1800–1914*, Oxford/New York 2001, 33–47.

52 ‘Die Freireligiöse Richtung und der Protestantenverein,’ in *Menschenhum*, vol. 1, no. 6, (1869), 82–88, 89–135.

only wanted to sever ties that linked them to Protestantism. Many of them began to explicitly embrace atheism at this time.

Conclusion

This essay has explored how natural science and politics became caught up with debates over spiritual freedom in German Protestantism in the middle of the nineteenth-century. Schleiermacher's letter of 1829 already gave a good indication of how this interaction would proceed. He sketched out three options. On one side stood radicals aligned with scientific atheism. On the other were church conservatives defending the literal truth of revelation against any claims of natural science. In the middle, mediating between these two extremes, were liberal Protestants, who identified with both science and revelation. Liberals like Daniel Schenkel trumpeted their convictions loudly and subsequent church historians have generally agreed that mainstream university theologians in Germany were secure in their *Vermittlungstheologie*. However, as this essay has shown, their efforts to harmonize theology and natural science took place in a highly contested field and that liberals were constrained by forces on the right and the left.

For the neo-orthodox, such as Hengstenberg, naturalistic monism was the rotten creed of the revolution that infected also *Vermittlungstheologie*. This viewpoint persisted in conservative Christian thought and was articulated very clearly at the end of the nineteenth century by the Scottish Reformed theologian James Orr, who blasted German liberal theology as an enormous genuflection to scientific naturalism and a dead end for Christianity. Orr exerted a lasting influence on the course of Reformed theology in the United States and was one of the chief authors of the famous series of tracts of 1910 to 1915, *The Fundamentals*.⁵³

On the left meanwhile, radicals contested the liberal claim to have harmonized science and religion. They found mediation a hypocritical stance that turned religion into a 'half truth' and they accused church liberals of colluding with conservatives to rob them of their 'freedom of teaching and learning'. When the dissidents were forced out of the Protestant Church

53 J. Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World as Centering in the Incarnation*, Edinburgh 1893; G.G. Scorgie, *A Call for Continuity: The Theological Contribution of James Orr*, Macon, GA 2004, 150.

around 1847, they claimed that they best embodied 'Protestant freedom' which they understood to be a key principle driving spiritual and social evolution. However, once separated from the Church and without the protection of its hierarchy, the once Protestant and now Free Religious preachers became vulnerable to attack from other intellectuals in the movement who did not share their commitment to theological tradition. These naturalistic monists challenged the basic Lutheran distinction between the body and spirit and argued not for the autonomy, but for the subordination of the spirit to the laws of the body. This was expressed clearly in debates over the conscience that took place in 1869 and 1870 in the pages of *Menschentum*. Liberals and older radicals alike argued that 'Protestant freedom' was only possible if the conscience had a grounding in the individual's interior that granted it some degree of autonomy. For the newer generation of radical post-Protestants who had come to dominate some Free Religious Congregations by the late 1860s, such an interior autonomy could be asserted in principle, however, it was difficult to justify from the perspective of their naturalistic worldview.

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