

The Free Religious Movement (1870s–1880s)

Abstract

The number of Christians in Germany who did not belong to the Protestant or Catholic churches more than tripled between 1871 and 1910, from approximately 82,000 to approximately 283,000. To these can be added Germans who professed other religions or none—approximately 14,000 in 1871 and approximately 214,000 in 1910. As the following three documents (A, B, C) show, the Free Religious movement—characterized by historian Todd Weir as a “fourth confession” after Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism—appealed to Germans who, generally speaking, did not disavow religion entirely. Rather, they distanced themselves from formal dogma in favor of a more humanistic ideal dating from the Enlightenment, with an emphasis on human rights, rationalism, and tolerance. The Berlin Free Religious Congregation in 1877 defined religion not in “any relationship to an otherworldly, supernatural being (God or the Devil) and life (heaven or hell), but the more or less conscious, eternal human pursuit of a harmonious relationship with the world around us on the basis of our own inner harmony, that is, our truthfulness and freedom of conscience.”

Source

A. The Ten Commandments of the Free Religious Community (1876)

1. Love God. In other words, seek to achieve an ever greater understanding of God's being and action in nature and humanity. Strive to illuminate your spiritual being with the divine ideas of eternal reason, love, justice, and beauty, and strive to live according to God's laws in the natural and spiritual realms.
2. Respect and honor nature as God's eternal kingdom and revelation. In other words, seek ever greater knowledge of nature in its intentions and purposes, as well as in its evolution; and use its powers and gifts for the happiness and betterment of yourself and your fellow humans, since this is the only way that God's kingdom will be your kingdom.
3. Love and respect all your fellow human beings, even those who are hostile to you, on the basis of their human dignity and purpose. In other words, keep holy their freedom, their honor, their rights, their property, and their lives. Assist them in their spiritual and material needs, and do not harm and abuse them for self-serving purposes.
4. Hold your own human dignity in high and holy regard. In other words, seek ever greater knowledge of your mind and body, and their laws and harmony. Educate yourself and live according to this knowledge. Never debase yourself through falsehood and vice, never through wrong attitudes and vile actions.
5. Marriage must be based only on mutual love and respect, guided by reason and for the purpose of a higher life and calling. Activate and increase love and respect in marriage and keep it holy through fidelity.
6. Parents, love and respect your children as entrusted to you by the Creator for the noble purposes of being. Educate them in body and spirit for their calling. Be their models and advisors, so that they themselves may live happily and may live for the joy and honor of you, the Fatherland, and humanity. Do not make them nor allow them to be made into tools of egoism and the drive to dominate. Children, respect and honor your father and mother and obey them with pure hearts as the protectors and teachers given to you by God. Be grateful to them in mind, word, and deed.

7. Teachers, raise and educate children and youth in the spirit of love and respect as belonging to their family, the Fatherland, humanity, and God, according to the divine laws in the nature of human beings. Be an example to them and consider them destined to be the bearers and representatives of a higher level of education, culture, and freedom.

8. Work and fulfill your professional duties with love and according to free choice, because right employment and creation for good makes you happy; ennoble you; preserves your mental and physical health; grants you independence, respect, and means; and elevates you towards the eternal Creator.

9. Love and respect your people and your Fatherland. In other words, fulfill your duties to the state by promoting its material and spiritual development, according to the moral needs of your nation's culture. Foster and, if necessary, commit your life and property to the independence, rights and liberty, and the true honor of your nation. But also observe the independence, the rights and honor of other peoples, and work to ensure that the laws of humanity become victorious over oppression and war.

10. Regard religion as the soul's most sacred power and supreme spiritual jewel whereby the eternal Creator-Spirit has made you and all the members of the great human family into his image, into brothers and the heirs of his kingdom.

If this power is transmitted through the light of the advancement of reason and science, it may rise from the depths of your spiritual being as a sacred intuition of the Divine, as a yearning for eternal truth and eternal life, or as love of justice, happiness, and virtue. Let the divine ideas of religion guide you and place your trust in them, even if your fate may often appear enigmatic and your life's path dark.

B. What is the Purpose of the Free Religious Community?

1. We call our community "free" to distinguish it from other religious communities. Our guiding principle is, "free self-determination in all areas of life according to the advancement of reason and science."

2. We assert this freedom, on the one hand, in the unrestricted self-administration of all the community's affairs; and on the other hand, as freedom of thought and conscience, in other words, the right to exercise one's own reason and ultimately to be one's own judge. In our view, the necessary supplement or precondition of this freedom is unconditional freedom of teaching and learning, as we aspire to teach and learn.

3. We demand this freedom not only for ourselves, but as an equal right for all. Thence arises the necessity of individual self-restraint and self-control. One can only be free insofar as one does not interfere with the equal freedom of one's fellow beings. Only through this freedom is it possible to overcome confessionality with its destructive prejudices and privileges, even in political and social life.

4. Our church is a religious one; but by religion we do not mean any relationship to an otherworldly, supernatural being (God or the Devil) and life (heaven or hell), but the more or less conscious, eternal human pursuit of a harmonious relationship with the world around us on the basis of our own inner harmony, that is, our truthfulness and freedom of conscience.

5. In our view, the sources of religion are nature and reason, which, like all things, are subject to the law of motion and evolution; and therefore we see religion in its theoretical aspect, not as some fixed (assertive) faith, but rather, as the pursuit of deeper, universal awareness. In the advancement of this pursuit, we consider priests and theologians with their myths and mysteries to be expendable—indeed, a hindrance.

6. In our view, religion in its practical aspect is essentially morality, above all as it is expressed under human, that is, under social and political conditions, which is why we seek to understand and improve

these conditions according to their laws. Our highest moral task is the pursuit of that common good in which personal well-being is simultaneously best preserved.

7. We have come together to form a community, since the power to effect public benefit and a practical solution to our task of religious reform is only possible on the basis of a unified, healthy organization. It is essentially a matter of educating the general public, and thus involves the greatest assets of our lives, which we can only achieve and only possess together.

8. The first purpose of our community is, through practical arrangements and measures, to provide members with the greatest possible protection from constraint upon conscience and to offer the opportunity for spiritual education to all; in particular, to establish the instruction and education of our children in our spirit. Our ultimate purpose, however, is the universal liberation from all internal and external religious violation, in which we recognize one of the most powerful obstacles to moral and religious, as well as political and social, progress.

9. Although the community is currently in agreement with the above principles, it reserves the right, and considers itself obliged, to change these principles at any time in accordance with more complete knowledge.

Adopted on February 12, 1877.

C. The Magdeburg Principles (c. 1880)

1. We want to be a community that strives to cultivate religion and morality. All party politics are excluded within our community.

2. We regard reason as the guiding principle for all human thinking, and in a religious respect as well, we can only accept that which proves to be true when subject to reason.

3. Therefore, we respect science and constantly strive to build upon our religious and moral knowledge with the help of science.

4. We see religion as the innermost concern of the human heart; therefore, we reject any compulsory faith or constraints upon conscience.

5. We respect the Bible as the testimonial document of the Jewish and Christian religions, but we see it as a human, not a divine book; therefore, it has no authority for us in religious and moral matters.

6. We know nothing of a divinity and therefore, we reject any particular belief in God, especially the belief in miracles, which contradicts the laws of nature.

7. We do not anticipate a hereafter. We humans can strive to do good and seek our happiness on this earth alone.

8. History shows us that all the goodness humanity possesses today has come about through human strength; therefore, we can only achieve the good we want through our own moral effort.

9. We act well if we can wish that all people should act as we do. Good is what serves the wellbeing of the individual and of the totality.

10. Therefore, our religion is the faith in goodness and the will to do good.

Source: A. “Die Zehn Sittengebote der freien Religionsgemeinschaft” (1876), in Johannes Ronge, *Die Religion als Anlage, Lehre und Leben*; B. “Was will die Freireligiöse Gemeinde?” (adopted on Februar 12, 1877), in “Menschentum,” *Sonntagsblatt für Freidenker–Organ des Deutschen Freidenker-Bundes* (Gotha), edited by Dr. August Specht, no. 10 (March 17, 1886); C. Magdeburger Grundsätze (c. 1880), in *Der Humanist* 4/1970. All three documents are from Lothar Geis, ed., *Freireligiöses Quellenbuch. Eine Sammlung grundlegender Texte über Inhalt und Ziele Freier Religion*, vol. 1, 1844-1926, 2nd edition. Mainz: Selbstverlag Freireligiöse Gemeinde Mainz, 2007, pp. 221–22 (A), 223–24 (B), 227 (C). Available online at: [http://www.freireligioese-gemeinde-mainz.de/QUELLENBUCH/Quellenbuch Band 1 \(1844-1926\).pdf](http://www.freireligioese-gemeinde-mainz.de/QUELLENBUCH/Quellenbuch%20Band%201%20(1844-1926).pdf)

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Recommended Citation: The Free Religious Movement (1870s–1880s), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-5070>> [July 03, 2025].