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Citation: Laqua, Daniel (2020) "The Most Advanced Nation on the Path of Liberty": Universalism and National Difference in International Freethought. In: Freethinkers in Europe: National and Transnational Secularities, 1789–1920s. Religion and Society, 86 . De Gruyter, Berlin, pp. 203-234. ISBN 9783110687163, 9783110688320, 9783110688283

Published by: De Gruyter

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110688283-010>
<<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110688283-010>>

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“The Most Advanced Nation on the Path of Liberty”: Universalism and National Difference in International Freethought

Daniel Laqua

Published in Carolin Kosuch, ed., *Freethinkers in Europe: National and Transnational Secularities, 1789–1920s* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), pp. 203–234

When William Heaford, a key figure in Britain’s National Secular Society, introduced a new section on “Freethought in Other Lands” for the periodical *The Freethinker*, he argued that the movement should not be seen through a national lens: “The glory of Freethought shines forth in the fact that it is not [...] a mere by-product of the English intellect, or some casual parochial characteristic chained down to a particular spot, or rooting itself to some eccentric local centre of manifestation.” Instead, freethought was “cosmopolitan, international, and widespread as civilisation itself.”¹ Such statements were far from exceptional. Protagonists of international freethought frequently stressed the universal nature of their cause when promoting their vision of secularity. In analytical terms, their agenda was associated with a particular “dynamic of secularization” – one that, in José Casanova’s words, “aims to emancipate all secular spheres from clerical-ecclesiastical control.”²

Professions of unity among freethinkers must not be taken at face value. Although their ideas and actions had cosmopolitan features, these were subject to many boundaries.³ This chapter examines how freethinkers sought to construct the universality of their cause while expressing notions of national difference, either explicitly or implicitly. An investigation of these ambivalences is particular relevant because recent literature has highlighted the existence of “multiple secularities” and different “secularisms.”⁴ While such work has drawn particular attention to non-Western categories and experiences, the debates within the IFF shed light on pluralities even within European settings. As such, the case of the organization reveals overlaps and intersections between different ways of framing “the secular” as a sphere and objective.

¹ William Heaford, “Freethought in Many Lands: Bohemia,” *The Freethinker*, June 7, 1908, 362.

² José Casanova, “The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms,” in *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. by Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, 54–74. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

³ I have discussed these dimensions in Daniel Laqua, “Kosmopolitisches Freidenkertum? Ideen und Praktiken der Internationalen Freidenkerföderation von 1880 bis 1914,” in *Bessere Welten: Kosmopolitismus in den Geschichtswissenschaften*, ed. Bernhard Gißibl and Isabella Löhr (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2017), 193–221.

⁴ Marian Burchardt, Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Matthias Middell, eds, *Multiple Secularities Beyond the West: Religion and Modernity in the Global Age* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2015); Casanova, “The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms.”

Recent work on anti-Catholicism and the culture wars of the late nineteenth century has stressed the need to look beyond specific national contexts, as these conflicts amounted to “a Pan-European phenomenon” that “demands an all-European and comparative perspective.”⁵ In view of wider antagonisms around state–church relations, the opposing camps developed transnational links. In the 1870s and 1880s, the Roman Catholic Church had started to establish new transnational structures, for instance the Catholic Defense Committee (1870–1878), which served as a “Black International,” and the *Union de Fribourg* (Fribourg Union, 1885–1891), a body dedicated to Catholic enquiry into social and economic questions.⁶ Freethinkers’ efforts to work across national divides also intensified in this period. To some extent, their international cooperation occurred as part of their competition with religious forces, yet it also needs to be understood within a wider context: the late nineteenth century was an age in which processes of global integration went together with the development of new international structures and organizations.⁷ In 1880, freethinkers from different countries created the *Fédération Internationale de la Libre Pensée* (International Freethought Federation, IFF) as a joint vehicle for advancing their cause. For half a century, the federation held international congresses and facilitated contacts between national freethought organizations.

The IFF is well suited to exploring commonalities and differences in secularist movements for several reasons. First of all, while freethinkers proclaimed their unity, the promotion of “freethought” had different meanings within different national contexts. As a result, the organization sought to construct and showcase a shared “essence” that was cast in universalist terms. Secondly, as a “Freethinkers’ International,” the IFF was a manifestation of the wider phenomenon of internationalism, which was intrinsically connected to ideas about nationhood.⁸

⁵ Christopher Clark and Wolfram Kaiser, “Introduction: The European Culture Wars,” in *Culture Wars: Secular–Catholic Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Christopher Clark and Wolfram Kaiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3. See also Manuel Borutta, *Antikatholizismus: Deutschland und Italien im Zeitalter der europäischen Kulturkämpfe* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010); Lisa Dittrich, *Antiklerikalismus in Europa: Öffentlichkeit und Säkularisierung in Frankreich, Spanien und Deutschland (1848–1914)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014).

⁶ Emiel Lamberts, ed., *The Black International, 1870–1878: The Holy See and Militant Catholicism in Europe* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002); Vincent Viaene, “Nineteenth-Century Catholic Internationalism and its Predecessors,” in *Religious Internationals in the Modern World: Globalization and Faith Communities since 1750*, ed. Abigail Green and Vincent Viaene (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 82–110.

⁷ Emily S. Rosenberg, “Transnational Currents in a Shrinking World,” in *A World Connecting 1870–1945*, ed. Emily S. Rosenberg (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 850–996. See also Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt: Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: C.H.Beck, 2009), 723–735; Johannes Paulmann, *Globale Herrschaft und Fortschrittsglaube: Europa 1850–1914* (Munich: C.H.Beck, 2019), chapter 5.

⁸ Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

National ideas – and different conceptions of the relationship between nationhood, statehood and secularity – thus formed an important subtext to freethinkers’ discussions at international congresses. Even at an organizational level, this aspect was evident, as the IFF was based on the affiliation of national member organizations.

This chapter explores the interaction between universal claims and ideas of national distinctness at several levels. After sketching out key differences within the constituency of the Freethinkers’ International, it considers the role of universalist tropes at international freethought congresses. In doing so, it draws particular attention to the way in which ideas about national pasts were entwined with conceptions of a universal struggle. The latter also manifested itself in the celebration of figures who were venerated as “martyrs” of freethought. Finally, the chapter explores these wider issues through the prism of a specific event, namely the IFF’s Prague congress of 1907, which took place at a time when education and nationhood were major political battle grounds in the Habsburg Monarchy. As a whole, then, the chapter highlights a tension: while freethinkers sought to promote secularity through international channels, they often emphasized distinct national paths.

National Contexts for International Freethought

To some extent, it is possible to argue that freethought had international characteristics from the outset. After all, its key principles can be traced back to the Enlightenment, which had wider European features – even if they manifested themselves differently within individual national contexts.⁹ Moreover, anticlericalism, which was common to many freethinkers, was in itself a transnational phenomenon, with the Roman Catholic Church serving as a major foil.¹⁰ Even at the linguistic level, there were shared roots, as the British term “freethinker” had closely matching expressions in other languages. As Jacqueline Lalouette has noted, the French term *libre penseur* derived from the English word.¹¹ Meanwhile, there were similar expressions in other languages: *librospensador* in Spanish, *libero pensatore* in Italian, *Freidenker* in German, *vrijdenker* in Dutch

⁹ Margaret Jacob, *The Secular Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019). On different national varieties, see the classic volume by Roy Porter and Mikoláš Teich, eds, *The Enlightenment in National Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

¹⁰ See René Rémond, “Anticlericalism: Some Reflections by Way of Introduction,” *European Studies Review* 13 (1983): 121–126 as well as, more recently, Dittrich, *Antiklerikalismus in Europa*.

¹¹ Jacqueline Lalouette, *La Libre Pensée en France, 1848–1940* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1997), 15.

and *fritänkare* in Swedish, to cite but a few examples. Hence, freethinkers had not only shared origins that they could point to but also corresponding terms by which they described their movement. Within the present volume, Daniela Haarmann further explores the terminologies and concepts associated with the promotion of secular ideas.

At its foundation in 1880, the IFF brought together freethought organizations from nine countries.¹² Over the subsequent decades, it expanded further, and from 1900 onwards, the organization maintained a secretariat in Brussels. Belgians played a prominent role in the IFF. In some respects, their participation reflected the strengths of Belgian freethought and the degree to which the question of church influence was subject to intense political conflicts in Belgium. At the same time, their involvement in the IFF formed part of a wider pattern of Belgian participation in international movements and organizations during this period.¹³ Alongside Belgian freethinkers, the main freethought organizations from France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain all regularly contributed to the federation's work, while the involvement of other countries partly depended on the ebbs and flows of the movement in those countries.¹⁴ By 1913, the IFF's council included representatives from sixteen countries; while largely European in its composition, Argentina, Brazil and Peru were also represented.¹⁵ The organization's Eurocentricity was not specific to international freethought but rather reflected wider features of European internationalism before the First World War.

Notwithstanding various shared aims, national differences affected the configurations and ideas associated with individual freethought movements. The development of distinct terminologies was a case in point. In Britain, "secularism" became a favored term for many groups and individuals that contributed to the IFF. The expression was historically recent, having been coined by G.J. Holyoake and promoted by Charles Bradlaugh to distinguish the members of the National Secular Society from less respectable "infidels" or "atheists."¹⁶ Secularists accentuated

¹² Historical overview of "La Libre Pensée Universelle" in *Guide illustré dédié aux libres-penseurs qui assisteront au Congrès International et Universel de Bruxelles: 21, 22, 23 et 24 août 1910*, ed. Fédération Nationale des Sociétés de Libres-Penseurs (Brussels: Fédération Nationale, 1910), 21.

¹³ Daniel Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium, 1880–1930: Peace, Progress and Prestige* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 80–114.

¹⁴ For a snapshot, see Fédération Internationale de la Libre Pensée, *Almanach-annuaire illustré de la libre-pensée internationale* (Brussels: Bureau permanent de la Fédération Internationale de la Libre Pensée, 1908).

¹⁵ Eugène Hins, *La Libre Pensée Internationale en 1913* (Brussels: Bibliothèque de La Pensée, 1914), 8–9.

¹⁶ Edward Royle, *Victorian Infidels: The Origins of the British Secularist Movement, 1791–1866* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974), 145–169. On British secularism in the era of the IFF, see Edward Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans: Popular Freethought in Britain, 1866–1915* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980).

the political dimensions of a commitment to the promotion of separation between church and state. Meanwhile, in France, the term *laïcisme* referred to the promotion of *laïcité* – a concept that had made its first dictionary appearance as an “activist neologism” in 1872.¹⁷

The example of *laïcité* illustrates that in some contexts, freethought could inform ideas about republican nationhood. In the French Third Republic, the role of the Radical Party as well as the Law on the Separation of the Churches and the State (1905) exemplified this aspect. Freethinkers were not only actively involved in the Radical Party, but also played a key role in shaping the ideas that led to the legislation of 1905.¹⁸ Today, *laïcité* is enshrined in the French constitution; according to Jean Baubérot, to some extent it “now forms part of the French national ‘patrimony’.”¹⁹ The French case is but one example of such connections. For instance, Susan Jacoby has noted that the United States were “a nation founded on the separation of state and church” while tracing a “tension between secularism and religion” that existed from the early days of the republic.²⁰ Meanwhile, in her study of European anticlericalism, Lisa Dittrich has drawn attention to national differences, noting that the close association between anticlericalism and republicanism in France and Spain was not mirrored in Germany.²¹ Such observations suggest the existence of varying secularities that were informed by the religious and denominational make-up of the country in question.

Beyond the role of freethought-related discourses in specific national contexts, there were significant differences in the composition of the IFF’s national constituents. In Germany, the *Freireligiöse Gemeinden* (free religious parishes) retained religious practices but were comprised within a broader conception of freethought.²² This aspect was noted in the British periodical *The Freethinker*, in an article that described the “free religious” movement as “quite frankly and outspokenly Freethought,” but noting its adherence to Christian beliefs and its retention of practices “which are, at best, but feeble imitations of church ceremony.”²³ Another prominent feature of the

¹⁷ Pierre Fiala, “Les Termes de la laïcité: Différenciation morphologique et conflits sémantiques,” *Mots: Les Langages du politique* 26 (June 1991): 48. Unless stated otherwise, all translations are the author’s.

¹⁸ Lalouette, *La Libre Pensée en France*, esp. chapter 5. See also Jacqueline Lalouette, *La Séparation des églises et de l’état: Genèse et développement d’une idée (1789–1905)* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005).

¹⁹ Jean Baubérot, *Histoire de la laïcité française* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000), 3.

²⁰ Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004), 3–4.

²¹ Dittrich, *Antiklerikalismus in Europa*, 145.

²² Fédération Internationale de la Libre Pensée, *Almanach-annuaire illustré*, 60–61. For a detailed analysis, see Todd Weir, *Secularism and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Germany: The Rise of the Fourth Confession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

²³ G. Caffrey, “Freethought Work in Germany,” *The Freethinker*, June 5, 1911, 11.

German movement was the growing role of “proletarian freethought.” Divisions surrounding the social question first became obvious at a national congress in 1908. One year later, Ida Altmann – a socialist and feminist – and Gustav Tschirn – a leader of the main freethought and “free religious” organizations – outlined their competing views in the IFF’s *Almanach*.²⁴ Ideological differences ultimately affected the international movement as well.²⁵ In the present volume, Johannes Gleixner elaborates on this issue with regard to proletarian freethought during the interwar years. Both his chapter and Christoffer Leber’s contribution shed further light on the national and political differences that shaped activism at the international level.

Although hostility to the Roman Catholic Church united the IFF, the practical implications of such views were shaped by the role of Catholicism within particular states and societies. In countries such as Belgium, France, Italy, Portugal and Spain, the battles of freethought were fought with particular severity because the stakes seemed higher, given the relative strength of the adversary. This difference was noted by William Heaford who, in viewing the “pamphlets issued against Christianity in Catholic countries,” concluded “that our English ways are not as their ways, nor our methods of attack as their methods.”²⁶ To Heaford, this was not a criticism: he concluded that it would be advisable to consider the views of “Freethinkers redeemed from the quackery of Protestantism – that illogical halting place on the road from Rome to Reason.”²⁷

In largely Catholic countries, freethought and freemasonry were often allied. For example, two of the IFF’s leaders from Belgium, Léon Furnémont and Eugène Hins, were also freemasons.²⁸ In Portugal, Sebastião de Magalhães Lima served as Master of the Grand Orient of Portugal as well heading the main freethought association. A report on the IFF’s Buenos Aires congress of 1904 observed that “[t]he full weight of the Lodges of Freemasonry was thrown into the scale in order to ensure the success of the congress.”²⁹ Yet such links did not exist everywhere, partly because of

²⁴ Ida Altmann, “Les Entraves au mouvement de la libre pensée en Allemagne,” and Gustav Tschirn, “Considérations sur les congrès nationaux allemands de 1908 et de 1909 des sociétés affiliées à la Fédération Allemande de Libres-Penseurs,” both in *1909 Annuaire illustré de la libre-pensée internationale*, ed. Fédération Internationale de la Libre Pensée (Brussels: Bureau Permanent International, 1909), 19–25 and 28–30 respectively.

²⁵ Daniel Laqua, “‘Laïque, démocratique et sociale’? Socialism and the Freethinkers’ International,” *Labour History Review* 74, no. 3 (2009): 257–273. On the creation and debates within international proletarian freethought, see also Jochen-Christoph Kaiser, *Arbeiterbewegung und organisierte Religionskritik: Proletarische Freidenkerverbände in Kaiserreich und Weimarer Republik* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981), 187–230.

²⁶ William Heaford, “The Lisbon Freethought Congress,” *The Freethinker*, October 30, 1910, 694.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Jeffrey Tyssens and Petri Mirala, “Transnational Seculars: Belgium as an International Forum for Freethinkers and Freemasons in the *Belle Époque*,” *Revue Belge de Philologie et d’Histoire* 90, no. 4 (2012): 1355.

²⁹ William Heaford, “Freethought in Many Lands: South America,” *The Freethinker*, June 28, 1908, 412.

major differences between national freemasonries. Pointedly, an IFF publication stated that “German freemasons are neither generally nor necessarily freethinkers.”³⁰ In Germany and Britain, masonic lodges adhered to the notion of a “Great Architect” – ideas that sat uneasily alongside the anticlericalism of freemasons in several other countries. German and British lodges had responded negatively when the Grand Orient of Belgium removed the notion of the “Great Architect of the Universe” from its statutes in 1871.³¹ Six years later, French freemasons took a similar turn towards the secular, creating further challenges for masonic internationalism.³² Jeffrey Tyssens and Petri Mirala have suggested that “the more conservative and rather religious Freemasonry of the Anglo-American variety [...] on one hand, and the politically radical and secular ‘Latin’ variety [...] on the other” constituted “two worlds with a completely antagonistic philosophical and political outlook.”³³

Such differences explain why we should treat any proclamations of unity with great caution. Freethinkers opposed church power and promoted the separation of church and state, but the commonality of their struggle did not make for a unified outlook. It was only at its 1904 congress that the IFF agreed on a definition of its subject, based on a motion by the renowned French pedagogue and politician Ferdinand Buisson. The compromise described freethought as primarily a “method” that rejected any form of dogma.³⁴ At the same time, it was characterized as *laïque, démocratique et sociale* – a phrase that became so closely associated with French political ideas that it ultimately made it into the constitutions of the Fourth and Fifth Republics (1946 and 1958). This connection is no coincidence: Buisson himself was a major figure in French republicanism and played a key role in shaping ideas about *laïcité*. A recent biography even refers to him as the “father of secular schooling.”³⁵

³⁰ Fédération Internationale de la Libre Pensée, *Almanach-annuaire illustré*, 60.

³¹ Hubert Derthier, “Libre pensée, franc-maçonnerie et mouvements laïques,” in *La Belgique et ses dieux: Églises, mouvements, religieux et laïques*, ed. Liliane Voyé, Karel Dobbelaere, Jean Remy and Jaak Billiet (Louvain-la-Neuve: CABAY, 1985), 44.

³² Joachim Berger, “European Freemasonries, 1850–1935: Networks and Transnational Movements,” *EGO – European History Online* (3 March 2010), <http://ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/transnational-movements-and-organisations/international-organisations-and-congresses/joachim-berger-european-freemasonries-1850-1935>. See also Joachim Berger, “Une institution cosmopolite? Rituelle Grenzziehungen im freimaurerischen Internationalismus um 1900,” in *Bessere Welten*, ed. Gißibl and Löhr, 167–192.

³³ Tyssens and Mirala, “Transnational Seculars,” 1359–1360.

³⁴ Fédération Internationale de la Libre Pensée, *Congrès de Rome, XX septembre 1904: Compte-rendu officiel* (Ghent: Volksdrukkerij, 1905), 183–196.

³⁵ Patrick Cabanel, *Ferdinand Buisson: Père de l'école laïque* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2016). On Buisson’s centrality, see also Jean Baubérot, *Laïcité 1905–2005, entre passion et raison* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2004), 13. On his transnational connections, see Klaus Dittrich, “Appropriation, Representation and Cooperation as Transnational Practices: The

Celebrating Commonalities

If the differences between the protagonists of freethought were greater than some freethinkers were willing to admit, they also raise the question of how claims about universality could be upheld. One way of doing so was through international congresses. Between 1880 and 1939, the IFF held twenty-five such events, featuring discussions and deliberations that involved delegates from its national member organizations. Moreover, many congresses had popular dimensions in the shape of public debates, processions and demonstrations. On several occasions, IFF congresses took place against the backdrop of events at which national and universal imagery coexisted: in 1885 (Antwerp), 1889 (Paris), 1900 (Paris), 1910 (Brussels) and 1925 (Paris) freethinkers met in cities that, at the same time, hosted world's fairs, and the Amsterdam congress of 1883 coincided with the International Colonial and Export Exhibition.

With their changing venues, freethought congresses allowed the hosts to showcase national movements and emphasize their country's contribution to a shared cause. The 1889 congress in Paris, for example, evoked a connection between international freethought and the struggles of revolutionary France. While marking the centenary of the French Revolution, delegates also commemorated the Paris Commune by placing a wreath at Mur des Fédérés of Père-Lachaise Cemetery, where 147 Communards had been killed in 1871.³⁶ The anticlericalism of the French Revolution and the Paris Commune made them suitable for a freethought event, yet such commemorative acts also had a national dimension: the representation of the revolutionary past was closely entwined with particular visions of French culture, politics and society.³⁷ When freethinkers returned to the French capital in 1905, they renewed their earlier claims at a time when the French Senate prepared to vote on the French Law on the Separation of the Churches and the State. For instance, in the run-up to the congress, the organizers expressed their confidence in a strong turnout from their compatriots, stressing that an "important year" for the defense of

Example of Ferdinand Buisson," in *The Nation State and Beyond: Governing Globalization Processes in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century*, ed. Isabella Löhr and Roland Wenzlhuemer (Berlin: Springer, 2013), 149–173.

³⁶ Commission du congrès, *Congrès universel des libres penseurs, tenu à Paris, du 15 au 20 septembre 1889: Compte-rendu officiel* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1889), 209.

³⁷ Robert Gildea, *The Past in French History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 13–61.

republican values lay ahead.³⁸ The congress passed several other demands connected to French political debates, such as calling for the abrogation of the *loi Falloux* (1850), which had included provisions for schools run by religious congregations.³⁹

At IFF congresses, speakers frequently praised the host nation for its positive historical role. In this respect, the gatherings in France were but one of many examples. For instance, at the 1910 congress in Brussels, IFF vice-president Georges Lorand described his home country Belgium as “the classic land of liberty and of the struggle for freedom of conscience.”⁴⁰ That event coincided with the eightieth anniversary of national independence, just as the federation’s foundation in 1880 had taken place fifty years after the Belgian Revolution. Indeed, in some respects, prominent involvement in the IFF exemplified the way in which some Belgians cast internationalism as a national project.⁴¹ Another example of the host country’s celebration was the IFF congress of 1913. Held in Lisbon, it took place three years after the republican revolution in which freethinkers and freemasons had played a leading role. Hosts and guests alike paid tribute to the way in which Portugal had seemingly accomplished many of the movement’s aims.⁴² In issuing an invitation to the Lisbon congress, Magalhães Lima proclaimed: “Portugal is a small country. But the Portuguese Republic is a great Republic. And why? Because its advent was at once a moral and a global act, blessed by the attention and solidarity of the civilized nations.”⁴³

Speeches and pamphlets are one way of studying congresses, and Jacqueline Lalouette has summarized some of the themes that characterized the debates at IFF congresses.⁴⁴ However, ideas about universality and national distinctness were not only expressed in such formal terms, as congresses had manifold performative dimensions. The 1904 IFF congress in Rome illustrates this

³⁸ “Aux congressistes français,” *Bulletin officiel: Association Nationale des Libres-Penseurs de France*, no. 6 (April–June 1904): 10. For the political context, see Lalouette, *La Séparation des églises et de l’état*, 413–414.

³⁹ Fédération Internationale de la Libre Pensée, *Congrès de Paris: 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 septembre 1905 au Palais du Trocadéro: Compte rendu* (Paris: Secrétariat du Congrès de Paris, 1905), 146. On the *loi Falloux* of 1850, see Baubérot, *Histoire de la laïcité*, 44.

⁴⁰ Fédération Internationale de la Libre Pensée, *Le Congrès de Bruxelles et la manifestation Ferrer, 20–24 août 1910* (Brussels: G. Meert, 1910), 38.

⁴¹ Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium*, 17–44. On the related issue of internationalism as a vehicle for Belgian foreign policy, see Madeleine Herren, *Hintertüren zur Macht: Internationalismus und modernisierungsorientierte Außenpolitik in Belgien, der Schweiz und den USA, 1865–1914* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2000).

⁴² Tyssens and Mirala, “Transnational Seculars,” 1364.

⁴³ Magalhães Lima, *Le Portugal libre penseur: De la monarchie cléricale à la république laïque* (Lausanne: Édition de la Libre Pensée Internationale, 1912), 5.

⁴⁴ Jacqueline Lalouette, “Les Questions internationales dans les congrès de la Fédération universelle de la Libre Pensée (1880–1913),” *Cahiers Jean Jaurès*, no. 212–213 (2014): 119–133.

aspect. At this event, the ongoing struggle between *l'Italia laica* and *l'Italia cattolica*, the representation of the Risorgimento and transnational notions of combating ecclesiastical power became intermingled.⁴⁵ In 1905, the American freethinker John Byers Wilson – a physician from Cincinnati, Ohio – published a detailed account of his *Trip to Rome* and his experience of the 1904 congress.⁴⁶ Wilson was a major figure in Midwestern secularism, formerly head of the American Secular Union and, at the time of the Rome congress, leader of the National Liberal Party. The latter organization transformed itself into the American Freethought Association shortly after his return to the United States, partly inspired by the contacts made in Europe.⁴⁷ In Wilson's view, freethinkers were engaged in a universal struggle – “an eternal warfare between the selfish and powerful of humanity on one side, and the weak and ignorant on the other” – in which “Freethought, Science, and Education” were the “battlefield.”⁴⁸

Wilson's book provided extracts and summaries of the different reports and speeches at the IFF congress. In this respect, it included material that also featured in the official congress proceedings.⁴⁹ Yet in addition, his account is instructive in the way that it sought to capture the wider atmosphere. Wilson stressed the scale of the event while articulating both its national and its international features. In commenting on the opening, he noted that “the immense Cortile and galleries were crowded, and thousands were standing out on the Plaza.” While there were delegates “from all the states of Europe,” Wilson singled out the large number of French participants – allegedly two thousand – as well as three hundred guests from “enlightened, priest-ridden Spain.”⁵⁰ On the first congress day, the organizers showcased the movement's strength through a public march to the Porta Pia, the place where Italian troops had entered Papal Rome in September 1870. According to Wilson, “[t]here were twelve to fifteen thousand in the procession, a band, two brigades of old Garibaldians in red shirts leading and the women numbering perhaps a thousand.”⁵¹ As a landmark event in the national unification of Italy, the Capture of Rome had been commemorated annually – but on this occasion, an episode from national history was transformed

⁴⁵ On the wider context of the Italian culture wars: Martin Papenheim, “Roma o morte: Culture Wars in Italy,” in *Culture Wars*, ed. Clark and Kaiser, 202–226, and Borutta, *Antikatholizismus*, 120–150.

⁴⁶ John Byers Wilson, *A Trip to Rome* (Lexington: James E. Hughes, 1905).

⁴⁷ Patrick W. Hughes, “American Freethought Association,” in *Encyclopedia of Christianity in the United States*, vol. 5, ed. George Thomas Kurian and Mark A. Lamport (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 69.

⁴⁸ Wilson, *A Trip to Rome*, 204.

⁴⁹ Fédération Internationale de la Libre Pensée, *Congrès de Rome*, 5–220.

⁵⁰ Wilson, *A Trip to Rome*, 145.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 160.

into an international affair: “Here were over five thousand patriotic spirits of other countries to join them in celebrating the triumph of conscience over superstition.”⁵²

The march to the Porta Pia was but one case of freethinkers putting a universal spin on phenomena that in other contexts were interpreted in national terms. The music at international congresses offers further examples. As Jacqueline Lalouette has observed, music played an important role at freethought events, with revolutionary tunes such as the Marseillaise offering “an expression of conviviality.”⁵³ While Lalouette’s comments refer to the French *libres-penseurs*, similar observations apply to the international movement, as exemplified by repeated renditions of the Marseillaise at the Rome congress. For instance, after the German scientist Ernst Haeckel had completed his speech, a band launched into the tune, and “while thousands sang the inspiring song, banners and handkerchiefs were waved, all making a scene of enthusiasm, seldom witnessed.”⁵⁴ On such occasions, the Marseillaise appeared not as a national anthem, but as a reference to the French Revolution’s transnational ideals. This interpretation was far from unique to international freethought: the song had already been used in various parts of Europe during the revolutions of 1848–49, and its reach extended into the German labor movement.⁵⁵

The Marseillaise may have been exceptional in its symbolic power, yet it was not the only “national” tune that could represent a universal cause. For example, the *Brabançonne* – the Belgian national anthem that dated back to the revolution of 1830 – and the *Himno de Riego* – which commemorated Spain’s Liberal Triennium (1820–1823) – were performed after Belgian and Spanish guests had given speeches at the IFF congress in Buenos Aires in 1906.⁵⁶ These renditions were more than nods to the nationality of the delegates: both songs were associated with national events that could be linked to a wider struggle for freedom. Moreover, the singing of different national tunes implied claims about the reach of freethought. During the procession to the Porta Pia, Wilson noted that as musical bands “played the national airs, and the Marseillaise, their music

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Jacqueline Lalouette, *La République anticléricale: XIXe – XXe siècles* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002), 398.

⁵⁴ Wilson, *A Trip to Rome*, 150. Further mentions feature on pages 160, 196 and 284.

⁵⁵ Axel Körner, *Das Lied von einer anderen Welt: Kulturelle Praxis im deutschen und französischen Arbeitermilieu* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2007), 237–240. On the history of the Marseillaise, see Hervé Luxardo, *Histoire de la Marseillaise* (Paris: Plon, 1989), and Frédéric Robert, *La Marseillaise* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions du Pavillon, 1989).

⁵⁶ The IFF congress in Buenos Aires, for instance, featured “Le Congrès de la libre pensée,” *Courrier de La Plata*, September, 21, 1906, 1.

was drowned by the thousands of voices that joined in singing.” To Wilson, it seemed that “all the Italians, French and German can sing.”⁵⁷

The culture of freethought congresses also included attempts to craft an explicitly international message. For example, the Parisian congress of 1905 featured a public recital of Lamartine’s *Marseillaise de la Paix*. The latter was a poem written during Franco-Prussian tensions concerning the left bank of the Rhine in the 1840s.⁵⁸ Lamartine’s piece celebrated the river’s transnational nature and promoted a cosmopolitan vision of Europe: “Egotism and hatred only have one fatherland / Fraternity has none!”⁵⁹ At the Paris congress, freethinkers also sang the *Internationale*, evoking links to the international labor movement.⁶⁰ Finally, in the 1930s, Renaud Strivay, a Belgian IFF leader, sought to create an international anthem with his *Chant des Libres Penseurs*. The song itself did not leave much of a trace but it is instructive in the framing of freethought, referring to past struggles but also the “dream of the glorious days / when reason and science will have secularized the heavens.”

More generally, however, the culture of freethought congresses is notable in the way that it drew on traditions, repertoires and symbols that were not genuine to the movement itself. The reference to episodes from national pasts and the use of tunes such as the *Marseillaise* and the *Internationale* indicate that international freethought was often hitched on to concepts that were rooted in nationhood or in revolutionary politics. While on the one hand, this may seem like a limitation, on the other hand, it suggests that the international promotion of secular agendas could build on existing traditions and imagery, even when the roots of the latter lay elsewhere.

National Pasts and International Martyrdom

Renaud Strivay’s *Chant des Libres Penseurs* described the point when “the world liberates itself from the detested servitude” as “Voltaire’s revenge.”⁶¹ In this respect, the *philosophe* was not

⁵⁷ Wilson, *A Trip to Rome*, 160.

⁵⁸ It was a direct response to the nationalist German *Rheinlied*. See René Garguillo, “La Marseillaise de Lamartine,” in *Relire Lamartine aujourd’hui*, ed. Simone Bernard-Griffiths and Christian Croisiller (Paris: Éditions Nizet, 1993), 157–159.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 160–165.

⁶⁰ See e.g. Fédération Internationale de la Libre Pensée, *Congrès de Paris*, 93. On the *Internationale* and freethinking, see Lalouette, *La République anticléricale*, 406–407.

⁶¹ Renaud Strivay, *Union mondiale des libres penseurs: Bruxelles 1880 – Prague 1936* (Brussels: Imprimerie Henri Kumps, 1936), 141–142.

primarily portrayed as a French Enlightenment thinker but rather as the embodiment of a universal cause. The mention of Voltaire was one of many examples of freethinkers referencing figures from the past. Such worship was exemplified in the *Biographical Dictionary of Freethinkers of all Ages and Nations*, written by Joseph Mazzini Wheeler, a British secularist journalist whose middle name paid tribute to the Italian republican leader Giuseppe Mazzini.⁶² Published in 1889, Wheeler's book presented an eclectic cast across more than 350 pages. For instance, the entries for the letter "A" featured Aristotle alongside figures such as the eleventh-century theologian Abelard and the Qarmatian ruler Abu Tahir, who led the sacking of Mecca in 930. These examples suggest an appropriation of past historical figures for a contemporary cause, evoking a perennial struggle between the forces of reaction and the power of reason. Likewise, John Byers Wilson evoked the memory of past figures when he described the Rome congress of 1904 as "the victory of all the great Pagan Moralists, the victory of Hypatia, Copernicus, Galileo, Bruno, Vanini, Voltaire, Rousseau, Paine, Shelley, and of every brave and loving soul, of their time, and since their day, who have given the thoughts of their brains to make men free."⁶³

Of the different individuals who were singled out for commemorative activities, those who had suffered violent deaths – and could thus be cast as martyrs – featured particularly prominently at freethought events. As Wheeler put it: "Freethought boasts its notable army of martyrs for whom the world was not worthy, and who paid the penalty of their freedom in prison or at the stake."⁶⁴ In Italy, the philosopher and scientist Giordano Bruno enjoyed a special place in this imaginary pantheon, having been sentenced to death for heresy in 1600. Italian liberals and radicals saw Bruno as a symbol for their anti-ecclesiastical model of *Italianità*.⁶⁵ This dimension was highlighted by the erection of Giordano Bruno statues in several Italian cities governed by the left.⁶⁶ The most famous such monument was located in Rome at the Campo de' Fiori, the square where Bruno had been burnt at the stake. Having been inaugurated in 1889, the statue was both "a provocative

⁶² Joseph Mazzini Wheeler, *A Biographical Dictionary of Freethinkers of all Ages and Nations* (London: Progressive Publishing Company, 1889).

⁶³ Wilson, *A Trip to Rome*, 142.

⁶⁴ Wheeler, *Biographical Dictionary*, iii.

⁶⁵ On constructions of *Italianità* more generally, including the role of the secular therein: Silvana Patriarca, *Italian Vices: Nation and Character from the Risorgimento to the Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Carolin Kosuch, "Hygiene, Rasse und Zukunftstechnik: Paolo Mantegazzas Beiträge zur Italianità," *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken*, no. 97 (2017): 316–338.

⁶⁶ See e.g. Mario Isnenghi, "La Place italienne," in *L'Italie par elle-même – lieux de mémoire italiens de 1848 à nos jours*, ed. Mario Isnenghi (Paris: Éditions Rue d'Ulm, 2006), 117–118. See also Bruno Tobia, "Urban Space and Monuments in the 'Nationalization of the Masses': The Italian Case," in *Nationalism in Europe, 1815 to the Present: A Reader*, ed. Stuart Woolf (London: Routledge, 1995), 171–191.

symbol” that angered many Catholics and “a venerated pilgrimage site among freethinkers.”⁶⁷ The controversy surrounding the planned monument as well as its subsequent unveiling attracted international attention.⁶⁸ Published in the year of its unveiling, Wheeler’s *Biographical Dictionary* noted the plans for a memorial to “this heroic apostle of liberty and light,” claiming that “the principal advanced thinkers in Europe and America” had helped to fund it.⁶⁹

The 1904 congress in Rome offered manifold opportunities to commemorate Bruno as an international martyr. Upon arriving in Rome for the event, John Byers Wilson spotted “a large lithography, about twelve feet high of Giordano Bruno, with the announcement of the coming Congress.” Indeed, in the Eternal City, “Bruno loomed up everywhere. Where the walls were spacious enough, there would be two or three of these huge lithographs pasted thereon.”⁷⁰ Independent of the formal congress program, British and American freethinkers decided to visit the Bruno statue. Having reached the Campo de’ Fiori, they recited a poem that Walter Hurt, editor of the American periodical *Culturist*, had written prior to the trip. It denounced the Roman Catholic Church as “a Courtesan queen” that had “long sat superbly enthroned [...] while all of humanity groaned.” A long litany of ecclesiastical misdeeds – including the way it had “offered the body of Bruno / to feed to the greed of the flame” – was followed by a more optimistic message: “No longer the Vatican voices / its rulings for all of the race / for reason now reigns and rejoices / in liberty’s glory and grace.”⁷¹

One day after the American and British visit to the Bruno statue, the IFF staged an official parade to the monument. Similar to the congress opening, the march featured “a long line of Garibaldi veterans, arrayed in the red uniforms in which they fought for Italian independence,” followed by state troops.⁷² On this occasion, the organizers eschewed the use of musical groups or flags as they sought to offer “a tribute to a citizen and man,” rather than staging a procession of “a political or class character.” Yet the participants did not require the musical accompaniment: having reached their destination, “the hymn of the Marsellaise [*sic*] arose and resounded upon the air.” In Wilson’s account, this expression offered a marked contrast to “the jeers and yells of the

⁶⁷ Peter D’Agostino, *Rome in America: Transnational Catholic Ideology from the Risorgimento to Fascism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 70.

⁶⁸ With regard to Britain, see Hilary Gatti, *Essays on Giordano Bruno* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 230–237.

⁶⁹ Wheeler, *Biographical Dictionary*, 56–57.

⁷⁰ Wilson, *A Trip to Rome*, 139.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 196.

savage superstitious mob” at the time of Bruno’s death.⁷³ From the Bruno monument, the crowd moved onwards to a statue of Giuseppe Garibaldi. The reverence shown to the political and military leader can be interpreted in several ways. To Italian freethinkers, it served to legitimize their own concept of secularity at a domestic level, by associating their efforts with a figure who was venerated as a national hero. Yet the involvement of foreign visitors meant that Garibaldi was also appraised as a universal figure – taking up an element that had already featured in contemporary representations of him.⁷⁴

One year after the events in Rome, the IFF congress in Paris marked the memory of another “freethought martyr,” the Chevalier de La Barre. La Barre’s case had been one of the *causes célèbres* of the French Enlightenment: in 1766, the nineteen-year-old nobleman had been burnt alive, with a copy of Voltaire’s *Dictionnaire philosophique* around his neck, as a punishment for “sacrilege.” Voltaire himself wrote about the “horrifying case” that “had appalled the whole of Europe (except for a few fanatic enemies of humanity).”⁷⁵ In 1905, the IFF congress began with a march that took an estimated 20,000 people – again with flags and music – to the unveiling of a monument dedicated to La Barre.⁷⁶ The location was significant: the statue was placed outside Sacré-Cœur, the enormous Catholic basilica whose construction had incensed many freethinkers. The memorial has therefore been interpreted as an attempt to “de-sacralize the site.”⁷⁷ The La Barre monument was the second Parisian statue dedicated to a victim of clericalism: in 1889, the municipality had erected a bronze statue of Étienne Dolet – a sixteenth-century critic of the Inquisition – at the Place Maubert, the square where he had been burned to death on heresy charges.⁷⁸

If figures from the past could be used to represent a universal and eternal struggle, freethinkers acquired a contemporary martyr figure when the Spanish authorities executed the anarchist and educator Francisco Ferrer on October 13, 1909. Several recent studies have

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Lucy Riall, *Garibaldi: Invention of a Hero* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

⁷⁵ Voltaire, “An Account of the Death of the Chevalier de La Barre,” in *Voltaire on Tolerance and Other Writings*, ed. Simon Harvey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 139.

⁷⁶ “Le Congrès de la libre-pensée: La manifestation du Montmartre,” *Le Radical*, September 5, 1905, 1. From 1907, La Barre was also commemorated through another monument, located in Abbeville, where freethinkers gathered on an annual basis – see e.g. Eugene Hins, *La Libre Pensée internationale en 1911* (Brussels: Bibliothèque de *La Pensée*, 1912), 77.

⁷⁷ Lalouette, *La République anticléricale*, 197.

⁷⁸ Jacqueline Lalouette, “Du bûcher au piédestal: Étienne Dolet, symbole de la libre pensée,” *Romantisme*, no. 64 (1989): 85–100. (Reprinted in Lalouette, *La République anticléricale*, 201–223.)

acknowledged the widespread international mobilization triggered by Ferrer's fate.⁷⁹ The Ferrer protests downplayed his political radicalism and focused on his work for secular education, casting him as a victim of Catholic reaction. Posthumous commemorations consolidated ideas about Ferrer as a martyr.⁸⁰ Memorialization efforts were particularly widespread on the first anniversary of his death. For example, the Italian *Associazione nazionale del libero pensiero "Giordano Bruno"* (National Freethought Association "Giordano Bruno") brought together 30,000 people who listened to speeches that praised Ferrer and joined together in cries of "down with the Vatican."⁸¹ In Lisbon, the anniversary of Ferrer's death coincided with the first national freethought congress – held merely eight days after the Portuguese revolution had disposed of the monarchy. A British report on the Lisbon gathering commented on history's "strange coincidence," claiming that October 13 had also been the day when, back in 1541, "the Holy Inquisition was officially established in Portugal." This assertion was historically questionable, as the actual date had been May 23, 1536. But the statement allowed the periodical to integrate recent events into a wider historical narrative: "And thus the blood of the martyrs fructifies, and all the Ferrers slain in the evil past look down from the heights of their peerless immortality upon a world growing better and wiser because brave men dared to suffer and die."⁸²

The IFF memorialized Ferrer through its congresses and by supporting the construction of a monument in Brussels. To William Heaford, the Ferrer monument was "more than a tribute in stone and bronze to a brave man": it highlighted "the martyrdom which Freethought and its heroes, teachers, and apostles have had to suffer at the hands of bigots." Moreover, it also pointed to "the martyrdom which may in future be inflicted upon Freethinkers if and wherever reaction raises its head of yore."⁸³ Ferrer continued to occupy a prominent place within IFF discourse. When the organization marked its fiftieth anniversary in 1930, delegates laid flowers at the Ferrer monument

⁷⁹ Kevin J. Callahan, *Demonstration Culture: European Socialism and the Second International, 1889–1914* (Leicester: Troubadour Publishing, 2010), 234–237; Daniel Laqua, "Freethinkers, Anarchists and Francisco Ferrer: The Making of a Transnational Solidarity Campaign," *European Review of History* 21, no. 4 (2014): 467–484, and Dittrich, *Antiklerikalismus in Europa*, 219–276.

⁸⁰ For examples, see "World-Wide Movement to Honor Memory of Ferrer," *New York Times*, *Sunday Magazine*, July 31, 1910, 6.

⁸¹ Eugène Hins, *La Libre Pensée internationale en 1910* (Brussels: Bibliothèque de *La Pensée*, 1911), 9.

⁸² Heaford, "The Lisbon Freethought Congress," 694.

⁸³ William Heaford, "Ferrer's Monument in Brussels – The New Crusade," *The Freethinker*, August 9, 1914, 506.

in Brussels.⁸⁴ A few years later, Strivay's *Chant des Libres Penseurs* proclaimed that freethinkers would "not rest until [...] our sons live the dream for which Ferrer gave his blood."⁸⁵

Representations of Ferrer as a universal figure coincided with a discourse that cast Spain as a despotic nation dominated by the clergy.⁸⁶ The IFF congress of 1910 exemplified this aspect. British freethinker John T. Lloyd reported that, at the event, "Ferrer's name was naturally linked with those of Counts Egmont and Horn, who had been cruelly massacred by Spanish tyranny three centuries earlier." Congress delegates gathered at the Grand-Place of Brussels, where a marble inscription stated that Egmont and Horn had been "beheaded in this square by order of Philip II for having defended liberty of conscience in 1568." Speakers explicitly likened the fates of Egmont, Horn and Ferrer. Moreover, the inscription was signed by "the International Committee appointed to commemorate the heroic death of Francisco Ferrer shot at Montjuïc for the same cause in 1909."⁸⁷ Lloyd acknowledged the limits of such comparisons, as Egmont and Horn "had many serious faults." Moreover, he also suggested that even in Spain, progress had been made since the days of the Inquisition, as "there are now to be found hundreds of thousands of stalwart Freethinkers, who are resolved, at whatever cost, to deliver their country from the bondage of superstition."⁸⁸ Nonetheless, as *The Freethinker's* main correspondent on international matters, William Heaford continued to evoke images of Spanish reaction.⁸⁹ Ideas of Spanish distinctness were reinforced by unfavorable comparisons with Portugal. For instance, the IFF's secretary suggested that "whereas Spain finds itself plunged more than ever in reaction, liberated Portugal continues to march on the track of progress and is effecting the separation of state and church."⁹⁰

The Tensions between the National and the Universal: the 1907 Congress in Prague

The IFF's congress of 1907 illustrates the tensions between universal claims and notions of national distinctness in particularly striking fashion. Held in Prague, it took place in a period of heightened

⁸⁴ Strivay, *Union mondiale des libres penseurs*, 25.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁸⁶ Dittrich, *Antiklerikalismus in Europa*, 256–264; Laqua, "Freethinkers, Anarchists and Francisco Ferrer," 472–474.

⁸⁷ John T. Lloyd, "Freethought in Belgium," *The Freethinker*, September 11, 1910, 579.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 579–580.

⁸⁹ See, e.g., a series of articles written by William Heaford in 1912: "The Spanish Inquisition," *The Freethinker*, January 28, 1912, 52–54; "Spain and the Inquisition," *The Freethinker*, February 4, 1912, 75–76; "Spain and the Holy 'Office'," *The Freethinker*, February 11, 1912, 84–86; "Ecuador, Spain, and the Inquisition," *The Freethinker*, March 17, 1912, 164–165; and "The Medievalism of Modern Spain," *The Freethinker*, April 14, 1912, 234–235.

⁹⁰ Hins, *La Libre Pensée internationale en 1911*, 5.

conflict between Czech and German nationalists. Before discussing the event itself, it is worth outlining its wider historical context. Pieter Judson has noted that the late Habsburg Monarchy was subject to manifold “battles over control of education.”⁹¹ Education was a contentious field in two respects: first, the question of secular education pitched Liberals and Catholics against one another. Second, towards the turn of the century, the role of language in schooling gave rise to further conflicts, especially in linguistically mixed areas. In 1897, the political sensitivities surrounding language were evidenced by the crisis over the Badeni Language Ordinances, a set of measures that sought to strengthen the role of Czech in the administration of Bohemia and Moravia. As Judson has argued, the conflict “galvanized German nationalist activists as had no other before it, motivating larger numbers of people to join existing nationalist and protective associations.”⁹²

Georg von Schönerer was a highly controversial protagonist in these conflicts. Having initially been elected to the *Reichsrat* as a liberal deputy, he subsequently promoted a radical nationalist agenda that fused Pan-Germanism and anti-Semitism.⁹³ He was not a freethinker, but he shared freethinkers’ hostility to the Catholic Church: in his view, Catholicism seemed to advance the cause of the Czechs. As John Boyer put it, “Schönerer’s strategy combined extreme nationalism and extreme anticlericalism in one unified, ideological format.”⁹⁴ In 1890, Schönerer launched his *Los von Rom* (Away from Rome) campaign which has been described as “a twofold attack on Austrian Catholicism and on Viennese Christian Socialism,” based on the notion that they “were part of a scheme to despoil the purity of German culture and to undermine the resolve Austro-Germans needed to resist Czech political imperialism.”⁹⁵ *Los von Rom* had limited success. The ambivalent response among German freethinkers is illustrated by *Das freie Wort*, a Frankfurt-based periodical with ties to freethought.⁹⁶ In covering Schönerer’s campaign, one contributor acknowledged the positives of a rupture with Rome but suggested that the “enemies of Papism”

⁹¹ Pieter Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 283.

⁹² Pieter Judson, *Exclusive Revolutionaries: Liberal Politics, Social Experience, and National Identity in the Austrian Empire, 1848–1914* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 259. See also John Deak, *Forging a Multinational State: State Making in Imperial Austria from the Enlightenment to the First World War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 223–226.

⁹³ On the process in which “racial nationalism” became increasingly prominent from the turn of the century, see Judson, *Exclusive Revolutionaries*, 258–266.

⁹⁴ John Boyer, *Culture and Political Crisis in Vienna: Christian Socialism in Power, 1897–1918* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 42–43.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁹⁶ John Mackinnon Robertson, *A Short History of Freethought Ancient and Modern*, vol. 2 (London: Watts & Co, 1915), 411; Horst Groschopp, *Dissidenten: Freidenker und Kultur in Deutschland* (Marburg: Tectum, 2011), 338.

needed “something better than an attachment to Protestantism.”⁹⁷ In this instance, Schönerer’s affinities with Prussian Lutheranism were an obstacle.

Another contributor to *Das freie Wort* was more receptive to Schönerer’s ideas, however. Writing under the alias of “Peregrinus” (a term that described free subjects without citizenship in Roman law), he praised *Los von Rom* as “eminently patriotic in an Austrian sense.”⁹⁸ His article formed part of a wider series on “the Austrian problem.” Strong anti-Slavic sentiment pervaded these pieces, as reflected in references to a “racial struggle between Germans and Slavs” and the proclamation that “the Slavic danger has never been greater than today.”⁹⁹ To Peregrinus, the “Young Czechs and the clergy” were “marching hand in hand.”¹⁰⁰ Such statements seemingly ignored that large parts of the Czech national movement maintained their distance from the Catholic Church. While some Czech activists did seek to integrate Catholics into their conception of the Czech nation, such efforts proved controversial within the national movement.¹⁰¹ As Jiří Malíř has argued, most members of the “Czech National Liberal camp,” which the Young Czechs formed part of, “held a critical and detached stance towards the Catholic Church,” while another section of the Czech movement, namely the National Social Party, embraced a “nationally motivated fierce anti-clericalism.”¹⁰² It has even been suggested that Bohemia’s distinct religious traditions could amount to “a Czech variant” of *Los von Rom*.¹⁰³ In other words, Peregrinus’s comments were highly misleading. At the same time, they showed how anti-Catholic and anti-Slavic rhetoric could intersect. In line with such discourse, he described Agenor Maria Gołuchowski, the Polish count who served as the Habsburg Monarchy’s foreign minister, as an “ancestry-proud aristocrat with the pain of a shipwrecked nation and the fervor of burning Catholicism in his heart.”¹⁰⁴

⁹⁷ J. Brand, “Das Übel der ‘Los-von-Rom’-Bewegung,” *Das freie Wort* 1, no. 22 (1902): 681.

⁹⁸ Peregrinus, “Los von Rom,” *Das freie Wort* 1, no. 5 (1901): 134.

⁹⁹ Peregrinus, “Das österreichische Problem,” *Das freie Wort* 1, no. 2 (1901): 39.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 41.

¹⁰¹ On these dynamics, see Martin Schulze Wessel, “Die Konfessionalisierung der tschechischen Nation,” in *Nation und Religion in Europa: Mehrkonfessionelle Gesellschaften im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Dieter Langewiesche (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2004), 135–150.

¹⁰² Jiří Malíř, “The Anti-Clericalism of Social Democracy and the Secularization of the Working Class in the Czech Lands,” in *Secularization and the Working Class: The Czech Lands and Central Europe in the 19th Century*, ed. Jiří Hanuš, Lukáš Fasora and Jiří Malíř (Eugene/OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 99.

¹⁰³ H. Gordon Skilling, “Masaryk: Religious Heretic,” in *The Czech and Slovak Experience: Selected Papers from the Fourth World Congress for Soviet and East European Studies, Harrogate, 1990*, ed. John Morison (London: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 72; 62–88.

¹⁰⁴ Peregrinus “Der polnische Kanzler,” *Das freie Wort* 1, no. 14 (1901): 423.

The IFF's Prague congress took place in a year that had already seen significant political mobilization. In May 1907, an electoral reform in the Cisleithanian half of the Habsburg Monarchy had resulted in the first elections based on universal male suffrage.¹⁰⁵ When freethinkers gathered in September, they affirmed the potential of their shared principles to override national differences and provide a forum for dialogue. The Czech freethought leader Theodor Bartošek opened the event by pointing out that “the two nationalities” had come together “in unity to accomplish an endeavor that had seemed impossible in light of the tense national circumstances of our country.”¹⁰⁶ Indeed, Czech and German freethinkers from Bohemia had jointly organized the event. Having visited the congress as a delegate from Imperial Germany, Gustav Tschirn emphasized this aspect in his report for *Das freie Wort*. As he suggested, national groups that were otherwise “divided by hostility” had engaged in “fraternally enthusiastic cooperation for the shared cultural ideal of freedom of thought.” Tschirn was hopeful about the positive legacy that the Prague gathering might have “for the nationality struggle in Austria.”¹⁰⁷

Some of the press coverage portrayed the event along similar lines. The *Prager Tagblatt* argued that the congress was particularly significant because “on this classic territory of nationality struggle, it has managed to attract Germans and Czechs to [undertake] joint work.”¹⁰⁸ The newspaper noted approvingly that the Czech academic František Krejčí had received “particularly great applause” for a speech in which he suggested that freethought might offer “a cleansing and overcoming of national antagonisms.” Krejčí argued that “the motives of national strife cannot be justified on ethical grounds.”¹⁰⁹ Symbolically, he switched from Czech to German midway through his speech.

Notwithstanding the sentiments expressed in such speeches, the congress was affected by the political tensions in Bohemia. The IFF's official report alluded to this aspect, referring to “the animosity which, in certain parts of Bohemia, exists between Czechs and Germans,” singling out

¹⁰⁵ In the wake of the elections, various Czech political groups put their joint efforts on a firmer organizational footing as they had lost electoral ground to the Social Democrats: Catherine Albrecht, “The Bohemian Question,” in *The Last Years of Austria-Hungary: A Multi-National Experiment in Early Twentieth-Century Europe*, ed. Mark Cornwall (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2002), 85 and 88.

¹⁰⁶ “Der Freidenker-Weltkongreß,” *Prager Tagblatt*, September 9, 1907, 3.

¹⁰⁷ Gustav Tschirn, “Der internationale Freidenker-Kongreß in Prag,” *Das freie Wort* 7, no. 14 (1907): 537. With thanks to Katharina Neef for sharing this source.

¹⁰⁸ “Der Freidenker-Weltkongreß,” *Prager Tagblatt*, September 9, 1907, 3.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

events in Prachatice/Prachatitz as “one of the battles where the racial animosity lit up.”¹¹⁰ As Pieter Judson has pointed out, Prachatice/Prachatitz was “largely a German-speaking administrative center” that “sat directly on the language frontier in a district whose rural majority spoke Czech.”¹¹¹ Shortly before the congress, attempts by Czech nationalists to stage a festival in this town led to violent altercations.¹¹² Czech leaders highlighted these events by sending a telegram to the IFF gathering. In the congress hall, Ernst Viktor Zenker, a radical Viennese journalist, received “lively applause” when he asked the delegates to “protest against these barbarian mores.” The congress subsequently passed a resolution that “condemned all nationalist agitation that departs from the peaceful path.”¹¹³ The motion portrayed such disputes as a division from the “successful struggle against reaction and clericalism,” yet it also seemed to take sides as it denounced “in the strongest terms any attempt that aim at violating the right of a minority to demonstrate.”¹¹⁴

Gustav Tschirn’s report described the episode as “a test of solidarity of the most beautiful kind.”¹¹⁵ Yet whereas freethinkers managed to agree on a joint stance, various external observers expressed their disapproval. The *Prager Tagblatt* argued that the IFF resolution had been adopted “under the pressure of Czech politicians” and that, in the absence of “real information,” it would have been better not to pass it. According to the newspaper, the freethinkers had violated their “proudly proclaimed principle,” namely a “love for truth.”¹¹⁶ Such staunch criticism is noteworthy as it came from a periodical that covered freethought in largely favorable terms. Likewise, an article in Vienna’s *Arbeiter-Zeitung* – the newspaper of the Austrian socialists – argued that the congress should have accepted that “the Prachatitz row is none of its business.”¹¹⁷ Seen from this angle, Zenker’s support for the motion seemed unrepresentative of Austrian-German sentiment. At Prague, his speeches – delivered with “captivating passion, humor and satire” – attracted praise,¹¹⁸

¹¹⁰ Eugène Hins, *Le Congrès de Prague (8 au 12 septembre 1907)* (Brussels: Bibliothèque de *La Pensée*, 1908), 17–18.

¹¹¹ Pieter Judson, *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 89.

¹¹² See e.g. “Große Demonstration in Prachatitz: Militär und Gendarmerie räumt den Marktplatz – Mehrere Deutsche verwundet,” *Prager Tagblatt*, September 9, 1907, 1.

¹¹³ Hins, *Le Congrès de Prague*, 18.

¹¹⁴ “Der Freidenkerkongreß,” *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, September 10, 1907, 4.

¹¹⁵ Tschirn, “Der internationale Freidenker-Kongreß in Prag,” 537.

¹¹⁶ “Der Freidenker-Weltkongreß,” *Prager Tagblatt*, September 10, 1907, 1.

¹¹⁷ “Der Freidenkerkongreß,” *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, September 10, 1907, 4. This statement was also noted in one of Prague’s German-language newspapers: “Ein bemerkenswertes Urteil über die Prachatitzer Resolution,” *Prager Tagblatt*, September 11, 1907, 3.

¹¹⁸ Tschirn, “Der internationale Freidenker-Kongreß in Prag,” 537.

yet his popularity rarely extended beyond secularist circles. Notwithstanding his election to the Austrian Reichsrat in 1908, John Boyer has noted his relative isolation. In this context, he has stressed the distinctness of Zenker's stance on national matters: his "emphasis on culture as opposed to nation or class as the defining variable of progress made it easy for him to project transnational schemes of ethnic conciliation."¹¹⁹

In light of the political sensibilities surrounding the situation in Bohemia, even the traditional commemorative acts associated with IFF congresses proved contentious. As part of the congress program, delegates visited the city of Tábor, placing a crown on a monument to the Bohemian Hussite Jan Žižka. On the one hand, this act honored an individual who had confronted the ecclesiastical authorities. On the other hand, Žižka's role in the Hussite Wars made him a historical figure that could be appropriated for national purposes. The organizers admitted that the visit to Tábor had triggered "lively polemics" in Prague's German papers. In response, the IFF's Belgian secretary-general argued that the federation had not intended to engage in "nationalist propaganda." Instead, it had merely built on the custom of recent congresses, notably the visit to the Bruno monument in Rome in 1904 and commemorative acts for La Barre and Dolet in Paris in 1905.¹²⁰ The celebrations in Tábor did not reach the scales of these earlier events: it turned out to be a "rather modest and embarrassing" affair, with a somewhat "cold reception" for the visiting freethinkers.¹²¹

The Czech–German tensions in Bohemia were not the only national question that figured at the Prague congress: the German social democrat Ewald Vogtherr spoke out against the oppression of Poles, Danes and Alsations in Imperial Germany, receiving much applause for his comment that people should "not be defined by their nationality or confession."¹²² Vogtherr's comments formed part of a debate on "Patriotism and Freethought." They were based on a resolution that he had introduced together with the Swiss freethinker Otto Karmin. Their motion criticized "chauvinism," arguing that freethinkers should work towards a "federation of all nations, based on equal rights for everyone."¹²³ Such comments indicate the wider internationalist discourse within the IFF. However, not everyone went along with such notions. Indeed, in response to the

¹¹⁹ Boyer, *Culture and Political Crisis*, 183.

¹²⁰ Hins, *Le Congrès de Prague*, 26.

¹²¹ Stanislav Balík, Jiří Hanuš, Lukáš Fasora and Marek Vlha, *Der tschechische Antiklerikalismus: Quellen, Themen und Gestalt des tschechischen Antiklerikalismus in den Jahren 1848–1938* (Vienna: Lit, 2016), 231.

¹²² Hins, *Le Congrès de Prague*, 39.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 38.

resolution, the French delegate Delarue proclaimed himself a “patriot.” In his view, not all nations were equal. He stressed that the French people would be “prepared to spill their blood for the freedom of other countries” and suggested that some nations were worthier to be defended than others. Elaborating on this theme, Delarue argued

That the responsibility of every freethinker, in the case of a war that no measure could have prevented, is – by all means – not to give any support to the war effort by a people with a retrograde mentality against a people with more advanced mentality; but on the contrary, to participate in the defense of the most advanced nation on the path of liberty against the most retrograde nation.¹²⁴

Such comments reveal ideas about a hierarchy of nations that, in some respects, sat uneasily alongside proclamations of universal values. Seen from another angle, however, they were but a manifestation of the ambivalent views that were present within the IFF. Even Karmin and Vogtherr’s resolution was in some ways ambiguous: on the one hand, it stated that “Freethought, like science is international.” On the other hand, it stressed that just as it “recognized everyone’s right to an individual life,” it would accord “the same right to the natural political and formations that are the nations.”¹²⁵

Despite these debates and divisions, freethinkers celebrated the Prague congress as a success. In his account for *The Freethinker*, William Heaford argued that the event had been “of incalculable advantage in stirring up the Czechs, the Poles, and their neighbors, the Austrian Germans, into united hostility against the powers of darkness represented by religion.”¹²⁶ He echoed the content of several congress speeches in claiming that Czechs and Germans were able to “forget their animosities under the beneficent aegis of Freethought.”¹²⁷ Moreover, Heaford’s comments illustrated how Czech freethinkers had been able to place their own activism within a wider historical narrative: “Evidently the spirit of Jan Huss [*sic*] is not dead in Bohemia, nor amongst the sons and daughters of that heroic race.”¹²⁸ A few years later, Heaford returned to praising Bohemia as this “land, the sacred ground which has been soaked with the blood of martyrs innumerable, headed by the indomitable John Huss [*sic*] and Jerome of Prague, is the generous soil from which the seed of Freethought has recently sprung into a rich harvest of activity.”¹²⁹

¹²⁴ Ibid., 40.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 38.

¹²⁶ William Heaford, “Freethought in Many Lands: International Freethought,” *The Freethinker*, July 26, 1908, 474.

¹²⁷ Heaford, “Freethought in Many Lands: Bohemia,” 362.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ William Heaford, “Bohemia for Freethought,” *The Freethinker*, January 7, 1912, 4.

Such comments are significant in several respects. They highlight that Czech activists had some success in casting their nation as a force for progress – built upon notions of a secular mission – rather than being dominated by reactionary interests. Such claims were more than rhetoric: freethinkers in Bohemia did enjoy links to influential political forces, for instance the Czech Realist Party and its co-founder Tomáš Masaryk.¹³⁰ Moreover, most Czech parties – with the obvious exception of the Catholic ones – had a wing that was positively inclined towards the freethought movement.¹³¹ The convergence of secularist and national representations was embodied by the figure of Jan Hus. Freethinkers claimed the late medieval religious reformer as a martyr for their cause, yet he also played a central role in Czech visions of the national past.¹³² This duality was not a contradiction: in freethought discourse, Hus could be a national contribution to an international pantheon. Unsurprisingly, Czech freethinkers planned an international congress to mark the 500th anniversary of Hus’s death. While the outbreak of the First World War meant that this congress never happened, its initial announcement highlighted the national connotations of this planned international event:

We would like this to become a new stage on the path towards the rebirth of our national character. We want the Czech nation to put an end to the spirit of Rome which would effectively be the best celebration of the martyr of [the Council of] Constance. We want that the year 1915 be the triumph of the Czech spirit over the spirit of Rome.¹³³

Conclusion

By the early twentieth century, freethinkers drew on a well-established repertoire that allowed them to assert the universality of their cause. Alongside speeches and pamphlets, they deployed processions, marches, music and a host of commemorative activities. In doing so, they suggested that their shared goals overrode national differences. Moreover, through the celebration of

¹³⁰ Johannes Gleixner, “*Menschheitsreligionen*”: T.G. Masaryk, A.V. Lunačarskij und die religiöse Herausforderung revolutionärer Staaten (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 71–77.

¹³¹ With thanks to Johannes Gleixner for clarifying and contextualizing this aspect, as well as also commenting on other parts of this chapter.

¹³² On the imagery of Jan Hus in Czech nationalism: Cynthia Paces, “Religious Heroes for a Secular State: Commemorating Jan Hus and Saint Wenceslas in 1920s Czechoslovakia,” in *Staging the Past: Commemorations in the Habsburg Lands*, ed. Nancy Wingfield and Marie Bucur (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2001), 199–225; Cynthia Paces and Nancy Wingfield, “The Sacred and the Profane: Religion and Nationalism in the Bohemian Lands, 1880–1920,” in *Constructing Nationalities in East Central Europe*, ed. Pieter Judson and Marhsa Rozenblit (New York/Oxford: Berghahn, 2005), 107–125; Schulze Wessel, “Die Konfessionalisierung der tschechischen Nation.”

¹³³ La Libre Pensée Prague, *Les Tchèques et la libre pensée* (Prague: A. Reis, 1910), 15.

particular martyr figures, they alleged that the IFF's work formed part of a struggle that had been waged for a long time.

The position and nature of freethinkers evidently varied between different countries. In some respects, this could in itself be of use to the international movement. For instance, by showcasing a nation's contribution to the wider cause, freethinkers could offer inspiration and renewed vigor to their peers in other countries. With regard to the Belgian case, Jeffrey Tyssens and Petri Mirala have noted the relevance of such transnational influences: "Looking optimistically at developments in France, Latin America and especially Portugal, Belgian freethinkers saw their aspiration to *laïcité* as a part of a broad progressive movement of history toward a secular utopia."¹³⁴ In this respect, references to national distinctness were not necessarily a matter of nationalism, but of identifying cases that might reinforce convictions about the onward march of freethought. The flipside of the coin, however, was that countries could also be cast as lagging behind on the road of progress. The negative portrayals of Spain, which the Ferrer affair reinforced, were a striking example of this dimension.

Freethinkers were hardly oblivious to notions of national difference. The freethought congress in Prague illustrated this point. Whereas to German nationalists, Slavic nationalism seemed allied to clericalism, Czech freethinkers posited a different vision in which the Hussite legacy allowed them to cast their nation as particularly progressive. But alongside such national discourse, the IFF congresses continued to proclaim the conviction that freethought would transcend national antagonisms. As subsequent wartime ruptures demonstrated, this view was overly optimistic – but the pervasiveness of this discourse suggests that universalist notions were central to freethinkers' understanding of secularity.

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¹³⁴ Tyssens and Mirala, "Transnational Seculars," 1369.

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