

**Speech given on behalf of the FNLP at the 75th anniversary conference
of the Liaison Committee of Free Philosophical Organisations**
(Dachverband freier Weltanschauungs-gemeinschaften, DFW¹)

Berlin, 13 October 2024

The theme of the congress was 'Living democracy and freedom of thought'.

Dear friends,

It is a pleasure for me to convey to you the best wishes of the *Fédération Nationale de la Libre Pensée*, *Freidenkerverband*² but also *Verband für Geistesfreiheit*³. It is important for us to call all the freethinkers of the world our friends and to address them as such, which is why I will grant myself this right today. This bond of friendship between all the defenders of freedom of thought is closely linked to today's theme: **'living democracy and freedom of thought'**.

'Living democracy and freedom of thought'

Living fundamental rights, living fundamental freedoms, means living our own freedom in relation to the freedom of others and 'the freedom of those who think differently'. A negative and selfish experience of freedom of thought would be meaningless for all of us: it would be a false freedom. We live in society and in the world. 'Secular', the adjective so often used today, originally meant only "relating to the world, being in the world". For us, a freedom of thought that is lived is necessarily a freedom of thought that is part of a world that is also lived, and that contributes to shaping this world under the sign of freedom; *a freedom of thought that is lived is, for us human beings, a freedom that is socially shared*. Freedom of the mind may be perceived by many as primarily an inner freedom, but it always spills outwards. Or, as the 1848 German revolutionary song *Die Gedanken sind Frei* puts it, 'thoughts are free':

They can lock me up
In a dark dungeon,
These are only attempts
Doomed to remain in vain:
For my thoughts
Overflow borders
And topple the walls:
Thoughts are free.

Even if it's in prison, free thought gets out, it can't not get out. It's there, and doesn't know any other way.

'I am here and I don't know what else to do' - these were the words with which Luther stood up to his enemies, but as we all know, he was not prepared to take the extra step of externalising his inner freedom. That's because there was little talk of self-determination and free choice of life in his work - and that's precisely what we're interested in. We freethinkers see the world, the lived

world, as the foundation of our existence. We cannot imagine how freedom of thought could be lived without flesh, without society, without a world.

Freethought, democracy and internationalism

So we want to live in freedom together, and shape the world in the direction of freedom together. And that means demanding democracy, deepening democracy and defending democracy. Whether it's Robert Blum or Johannes Ronge⁴, Giuseppe Garibaldi or Victor Hugo, Louise Michel or Ida Altmann-Braun⁵, freethinkers have marked the destiny of European democracies at decisive moments - sometimes successfully, sometimes not, often at the cost of their own lives. Our commitment to freethought has always been cosmopolitan, international, universalist and willingly internationalist.

Unfortunately, today we only have to look out of our windows to see that the decline in public freedoms and the crisis of parliamentary democracy go hand in hand with the rise of imperialism and xenophobia. The spread of nationalist and imperialist wars around the world is a very worrying sign. Let's be clear: in these regressive endeavours, it is anything but rare for the established faiths to be called to the rescue by the servants of the established order - and they are usually quick to do so. Nor is it uncommon for them to prepare the ground for dictators. And it is equally not uncommon for dissidents, freethinkers and other members of philosophical minorities to be the first to be pilloried and deprived of their freedom as part of these liberticidal endeavours.

This is the case in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. It is, of course, also the case in the Middle East, where the horror today does not know any bounds. But these same clerical forces are also active in domestic politics, and are often behind fascist attempts and episodes verging on civil war, always with the aim of oppressing their own people: Trump and Bolsonaro are striking examples. Events such as these demand our solidarity and attention, including our attention on the domestic political scene.

We must never forget that we don't want to experience freedom of thought and democracy just for ourselves, because then we wouldn't really be experiencing them. We want freedom and democracy for everyone, not just for ourselves.

Separation and the historical forms of the transition to secularism

Democracy for all, freedom of thought for all: this also applies to the domestic political scene, as I said. The fact that we defend '*the freedom of those who think differently*', as Rosa Luxemburg used to say, means that - contrary to certain preconceived ideas - our activity cannot be satisfied with lobbying in the interests of people without religion. The DFW, the 'Liaison Committee of Free Philosophical Organisations', is aware of this and is showing the way for all German freethinkers and adogmatics. This is also linked to the fact that the DFW - like the German Humanist Federation - groups together associations that have the corporate rights attached to established denominations, and other associations that do not have this status, which does not prevent the DFW from leaving behind any false polemics that might arise on this subject.

I would like to expand on this point for a moment, because it shows why we freethinkers can and

must act strategically without ever losing our emancipatory focus. It is a well-known fact that *French freethinkers fight all attempts to introduce corporate rights for religious and philosophical organisations in France*, as well as all attempts to introduce a system of pillarisation in the sense of the old Dutch *Verzuiling* or the Austrian politico-confessional system. This is, of course, linked to historical developments: in nineteenth-century France, we had a system where the Roman Catholic Church was essentially functionalised and more or less autonomously part of the State apparatus, while minority denominations were confined to structures under government supervision and police surveillance.

After the Dreyfus Affair, various democratic reforms were introduced to strengthen organised civil society, including Europe's most liberal law on associations in 1901. Over the next four years, the centre-left coalition then in power turned its attention to the separation of church and state, eventually adopting an equally liberal law, the famous Law of 1905. This law was directly based on the 1901 law on associations, as faith-based organisations were essentially subject to the provisions relating to associations of public utility. As the following years were marked by a bourgeois government defending an authoritarian form of anticlericalism, the liberal solution came to be recognised by all denominations as a lesser evil - even if in the case of the Roman Catholic Church it was clearly a strategic retreat, which was followed by decades of partly successful undermining.

The fact remains that the transition was fairly straightforward, and that the liberal law on associations provided a democratic basis that was accepted by the stakeholders because of the balance of power at the time - so that the idea of specific corporate rights for religious and philosophical organisations had no *raison d'être*. In such a context, *any attempt to introduce corporate rights must - to this day - be seen as a step backwards*. However, it is well known that such a rapid secular transition never took place in Germany, even if the Weimar Constitution had raised some hopes. On the contrary, depending on the federal state, freethinkers had to contend with specific and variable structures, national churches, laws and socio-political balances of power. In many cases, certain rights could only be exercised with corporate status. From a strategic point of view, this means that *the acquisition of corporate rights may have been a form of transition, at least as long as the path led to individual and collective freedom of thought* - and only as long as that was the path.

Defending the freedom of others

Because in reality, *we cannot be satisfied with demanding equal rights for freethinkers, even if we must of course do so where we are discriminated against*. This question of equal rights for philosophical or religious groups is only right insofar as it contributes to the evolution of society towards real democracy. Let's take an example: in Germany, Christian charities and hospitals have to follow a specific labour law, Church law. But *freethinkers and serious humanists will never demand that retirement homes run by humanists follow humanist labour law!* This is because general labour law is much fairer and more protective than church law, and can be improved through collective agreements with the unions - which is not the case with church labour law. The democratic concern is therefore not to offer humanist retirement homes the same rights as Christian retirement homes. The opposite is true: the aim is to put retirement homes and other denominational establishments on an equal footing with comparable public establishments, to the detriment of the churches as employers of course, but to the benefit of their employees, a not inconsiderable number of whom belong to the churches that employ them. But this is precisely the

crux of the matter: *the victims of the churches' privileges are often members of those same churches*. And when the rights and freedoms of church members are infringed, we must not remain indifferent.

Let's take an extreme example in terms of the cruelty of the harm suffered: the sexual abuse perpetrated by members of the clergy. Many of the victims were believers, and many still are. Moreover, among those who tried in vain to push the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the bishops to take action, there were also priests. We know of such cases in France. But the churches defend themselves and try to limit compensation and hide their own historical failings. To do this, they often benefit from political support. *We freethinkers cannot remain passive in the face of this situation: we stand by the victims, whether or not they are close to our philosophical ideas*.

So the watchword is: *the freedom of those who think differently also encompasses the freedom of believers* - including and especially for us. What's more, this freedom also includes the freedom of some of our objective enemies. If our enemies are not acting unconstitutionally and contrary to human rights, they should enjoy the same rights as everyone else. This may seem naive. But our predecessors paid a heavy price and we have learned our lesson: we are the only ones who know from the outset that they will be among the losers of any authoritarian solution, whatever it may be. Tolerating the absence of freedom, or even betting on the absence of freedom, would be organisational and political suicide for freethinkers. And the same applies to an absence of freedom that claims to be atheism: state atheism is a state religion, so freethinkers must also fight state atheism.

Freedom: a means to an end

Freedom is therefore both a means and an end. Freedom is the best path to freedom. Similarly, democracy is the best way to deepen democracy. For us, freedom is a method, so free thought is also a method. This is the difference between atheism and freethought: freethought is a method, whereas atheism is a content or a state. *Freethinking politics is therefore necessarily a democratic politics, and this implies that religious and philosophical affairs should not be affairs of state*.

But as is clear from the foregoing discussion, *if religion is not a matter for the state, it is not a 'private matter' either* - not in the least. For between the State and the individual, there is society, where we live and act in accordance with our freedom. If religion and philosophy were private matters, our organisations wouldn't exist! And today's watchword, 'living democracy and freedom of thought', would be meaningless. We need to get back to basics: *freedom of thought is not a negative freedom without a goal. It is a positive, goal-oriented freedom. It is a practice and a method rooted in society. Our aim is to shape the world and society in a direction that is emancipating, human and democratic*. That's why we need associations like the DFW, that's why we need the friendship of all freethinkers in the world.

It is in this spirit that I would like to conclude by inviting you all to the 9th World Congress of the International Association of Freethinkers, which we are organising on 10 and 11 October 2025 in Grenoble and Lyon, with freethinkers from all over the world, to discuss two key themes that I also mentioned in this presentation: the crimes of the Churches and international networking between freethinkers' solidarity associations. We hope to see you there to pursue our common goal, so aptly named by Heinrich Heine, the Franco-German freethinker par excellence, when he wrote:

‘We are fighting for the divine rights of humanity’.

Formerly Confédération Populaire pour la Liberté de Pensée (Popular Confederation for Freedom of Thought), *Volksbund für Geistesfreiheit*.

² Fédération des Libres-Penseurs: the German name evokes atheist and socialist Free Thought.

³ Fédération pour la Liberté de Pensée: name preferred by freethinking organisations including spiritualist groups.

⁴ Robert Blum and Johannes Ronge were the first major organisers of the German freethinking movement. Central protagonists of the 1848 revolution in the German-speaking world, they were both persecuted by counter-revolutionary forces. Blum was executed in 1848, while Ronge spent several decades in exile in England.

⁵ Freethinking feminist and socialist from Berlin. She led the German delegation to the Congress of Rome.