

One long neglected element: the religious factor in Freemasonry

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Introduction

The analysis of masonic culture has a structural-descriptive as well as a critical-normative perspective. On the structural-descriptive level, it gives an account of the environment in which masonry was framed and by which it was influenced. The critical-normative approach stresses the way in which it all-pervasively masonic structures are coping with culture and religion. However, the religious impetus is structural but not neutral. Indeed, freemasons have access to an unprecedented range of profound religious material but, looking to the ritual evolutions, we must differentiate when we speak of freemasonry, we cannot consider freemasonry to be in any way as homogeneous as we think. Also, it would be wrong to engage the reflexion from the point of view of the contemporary continental experience. What is necessary is an exploration of faith, religion and culture in 18th century England as well as an exploration within the broader European and even world-wide context.

An 'exceptional case'

For many continentals the situation of freemasonry in England is 'an exceptional case', while the evolution of freemasonry in the rest of the world has not taken place in any way comparable to Great Britain. The specific english context had fundamental implications for values and attitudes towards religion. But for the most part, continental masonic writers coming from Roman-catholic countries, have set about critiquing theistic freemasonry as they would any religion that proffered theistic or deistic values contrary to, or in competition with their own. There are a lot of examples of the counter-religious approach. Continental freemasonry more or less did to religion what the French enlightenment did to the Church. British Freemasonry at the other hand stands for the values that are supreme in the life of the church and expects each member to follow his own faith and to place his duty to God above all other duties: a member who is true to the principles he learns in Freemasonry will be a better church member because of it.

Framed in a christian society

Freemasonry was framed in the 18th century in an almost purely christian society with its ceremonial and rituals heavily influenced by Christian culture. It was in

this context that it first gave hope to achieving a reduction of religious struggles and strives, presenting itself in the course of the years as a specific social entity and driving force and mirror for society in full flood of transformation. Transcending its English origins, it quickly became an international phenomenon, first French and then rapidly European and crossing the oceans, world wide. While against this background the infinite diversity and complexity of the masonic movement defies any simplistic generalizations, there are nevertheless certain characteristics common throughout the history and in the masonic 'systems' that foster a certain unity in diversity. In order to pay heed to that immense diversity and complexity of the Masonic reality, this article seeks to integrate voices from various countries and regions. This is necessary since intimately linked to the society of its time it would be impossible to separate Freemasonry from the surrounding religious society without turning it into something manufactured. As this article will point out, this masonic commonality not only includes the collective memory of biblical imagery and its translation into moral practice, but also of negative religious experiences as religious oppression and the struggle against ultramontanism.

The lack of attention to and debate regarding Freemasonry's relationship with religion is perplexing given that the masonic and religious worlds were fundamentally intertwined and mutually dependent. History of Freemasonry has been seriously hindered by neglecting this crucial factor. Although the recently published *Handbook of Freemasonry* consists of several Chapters dealing with the relationship between Freemasonry and specific religious traditions, even the non-Abrahamic religions, the question of the influence of the faiths in question is less focusing on rites and systems than on institutional critiques and relations. This was, as Charles Porset indicated in his article on Masonic historiography, of course predictable: as a *social entity* Masonry did not enjoy any special privilege that set it apart and it was studied in the same way as other social entities of a similar kind such as clubs, societies or political parties.¹ In order to gain a more thorough understanding of the basic moral and religious values widely shared by Freemasons arising from their common understanding of the interrelatedness of (para) biblical narratives, fraternity, society and personhood, it is therefore helpful first to turn briefly to key concepts as far as they pertain to biblical religion. From these emerge fundamental aspects of how religion and biblical tradition is perceived from a masonic perspective.

While the infinite diversity and complexity of the masonic mouvement defies any simplistic generalizations, there are nevertheless certain characteristics common throughout the world that foster a certain unity in diversity. This commonality not only includes the collective memory of a basic ritualistic practice

¹ Charles Porset, 'Masonic Historiography', in Hendrik Bogdan and Jan A.M. Snoek (eds.), *Handbook of Freemasonry*, Leiden/Boston 2014, 117.

as catalyst for processes of Self-invention, but also contains basic moral and religious values widely shared by Freemasons arising from their common understandings of the interrelatedness of religious based moral practices, community and personhood. Although, since the eighteenth century, Freemasonry had a clearly ecumenical ambition, it nevertheless also constituted in some situations a potential instrument for the fostering of denominational cohesion. It is clearly shown by recent research that this needs to be no contradiction. Freemasons combined different levels of conceptual and practical identification, as an agent of change.

Freemasonry and religion

Contrary to the post-Enlightenment Western perception that commonly relegates religion to the private sphere, moral religion in the masonic sphere is all-encompassing, i.e. it is affecting all of life's dimensions. In Freemasonry, the social force of Morality embody communal principles of recognition. It elevates the concept of voluntary self-curtailment to a form of civil autonomy that simultaneously serves as a basis for setting new moral standards to take shape through the fusion of value judgments, objects of value, and modes of evaluation. It focuses on well-being of people, and the community at large. Well-being, as seen in this sense has both external (material/societal) and internal (psychological/spiritual) dimensions. With religious struggles and strives being detrimental to both external and internal well-being, it is of direct concern to religion and vice-versa. Further aspects include the belief in the masonic notion of experience as a very specific one as well as the belief in a sense of community (called 'brotherhood') between humans, resulting in an ecumenical merging of Morals and Religion.

Another element is the interconnectedness of humans with one another and with their environment due to their common source and goal. From this interconnectedness arises the duty to help the brethren. Nevertheless Freemasonry, in Britain and the rest of Europe, is complex and often contradictory. It could lead to radical developments, or it could serve to strengthen existing hierarchies.

In this context, the concept of the 'ancestors' needs to be mentioned. The manner of constituting a new lodge is set forth in the Book of Constitutions of 1723 with the customary claim that it is 'according to the ancient usages'. It is the ability of Freemasonry to affirm that this gives a role to tradition in the current masonic life while at the same time it is in no sense a theological perspective that allows to speak of Freemasonry as a religion. Nevertheless there is from the beginning a generally recognized close relationship between the anglican / protestant movement (viz. of the Liberal, rationalistic and in Northern Europe of the pietistic type) and Freemasonry. They are sometimes even considered as parent and child, as expressed in the *Hamburger Fremdenblatt*, June 13, 1917 for the two

hundredth anniversary of Freemasonry (1717) and the four hundredth anniversary of the Reformation:

The coincidence, for it is only a coincidence, which unites the two celebrations in the same year suggests the question as to whether these two spiritual forces, Protestantism and Freemasonry, are not very closely related to each other. It is a remarkable fact that the one rests on the other as on its foundation and that Freemasonry is inconceivable without Protestantism.

It should be emphasized that the impact of theologians during the age of Enlightenment which dominated the world of ideas in Europe in the 18th century, changed radically the face of European Protestantism, accentuating the cultural-politic dimension. The principal goals were liberty, progress, reason, tolerance, and ending the abuses of the church. The logic of the struggle made fraternizing and sociability, separate from church and state, all the more appealing. The Enlightenment was marked on an international level by increasing empiricism and scientific rigor, along with increased questioning of religious orthodoxy. The Enlightenment developed in national settings while ideas knew only linguistic borders, seldom territorial ones. Theologians of the Enlightenment wanted to reform their faith to its generally non-confrontational roots and to limit the capacity for religious controversy to spill over into politics and warfare while still maintaining a true faith in God. In fact, very few enlightened intellectuals, even when they were vocal critics of Christianity, were true atheists. Rather, they were critics of orthodox belief. Early participants in the Radical Enlightenment, such as Bernard Picart and Jean-Frederic Bernard, examined the religions of the world without the slightest interest in their veracity.²

Only later this proposition was undermined by a decrease in acceptance of the divine life. By proposing to use the language and world of scripture as the house Freemasons inhabit together and the rituals they use, it told them that they may find direction and, indeed, transformation as they make their own the story of the Bible. It was only through encounters with other systems of value, the concepts were changing along with the religious support system. As Margaret Jacob underlined, controversy surrounds the Masonic element in the Radical Enlightenment and most recently freemasonry's role in the Enlightenment has been dismissed entirely. The issue comes down to the value of social networks, as opposed simply to ideas in books, in fostering enlightened attitudes and beliefs. Exported from Britain, freemasonry could also take on meanings separate from its originally British

² M. Jacob, Lynn Hunt and Wijnand Mijnhardt, *The Book that Changed Europe. Bernard and Picart's Religious Customs and Ceremonies of all the Peoples of the World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2010).

identity. The freemasonry of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment did not exist in seventeenth-century Scotland. Looking beyond *philosophes* and salons, Jacob locates a strong revolutionary pulse in a coterie of early eighteenth century publishers, journalists, and Freemasons in the Netherlands, Europe's only Protestant republic. Not only do ideas in different fields have a pronounced effect upon man's activity, but his behavior greatly influences his beliefs. Ideas and intellectual traditions are molden by the crucible of historical action.³ It is necessary, therefore, always to examine the social, religious and political involvement.

The progressive decline of christian tradition

One can discern in the 19th century in some parts of continental Europe a progressive decline in the traditional christian support system of masonic societies, because of the emphasis on humanistic and atheistic values, all of which at first sight undermine the key-concepts of more traditional masonic systems. This is a legacy that challenges a number of negative forces. It suggests that genuine and honest exchange in masonic debate is essential and that for this to work there must be a basic willingness to silence one's dreams of invulnerable rightness. In contrast to an unwillingness to think in terms of shared narratives, we have to focus on the underlying universal masonic narrative, crystallized uniquely in rituals, words and tokens, in which the true internal image of Freemasonry is discovered. Once in Europe, lodges could exist that included Catholics as well as Protestants, even French clergy found a home. The call for a more universal and phenomenological approach is supported by current developments in philosophical, ritualistic as well as sociological-masonic studies. After decades of the almost uncontested domination of antagonism between different masonic approaches, we have witnessed a renewed interest in questions of desecularisation of Freemasonry. There is no longer distinction between religious or secular rituals, as all actions can be ritualized, meaning that rituals are no longer a specific religious, nor a different category of actions. Rather, it underlines the specific character as a system of Morality, veiled in biblical and para-biblical allegory the intensity of which is increased by rituals, allegories and prayer. In other terms, the belief is, as the Old Charges indicate, the Masonic tradition is in line with the operative masons in Britain, necessarily Trinitarian Christians. The Cooke Manuscript of about 1425 enjoins them "princypally to love god and holy chyrche & alle hallows" (all saints). In post-Reformation versions (after 1534) reference to the saints was omitted. In Paris by the 1740s the philosopher and freemason, Claude Helvétius, was a materialist. The leader of Amsterdam freemasonry, Rousset de Missy, was a pantheist. Montesquieu, also a freemason, was probably some kind of deist. I

³ See: M. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment - Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans*, London 2006.

disagree with Margaret Jacob stating that “rarely do lodge ceremonies, even in Catholic countries, contain overtly Christian language”. In my view Christian tradition not only significantly shape the Masonic perception of the system of Morality, but also facilitate resources in the struggle to transmit the message. More than the scientific societies, or the salons and literary circles, the lodges embraced a specific social ideology that included the bonds of brotherhood, the need “to meet upon the level,” and the necessity for disciplined adherence to the rules for behavior put in place via a biblical (meta)narrative by every lodge.

The first Constitutions

When James Anderson and his committee of fourteen produced the Constitutions of 1723, the first official book containing the History, Charges and Regulations of the Fraternity, they had a clear image of the Masonic tenure concerning God and religion. Freemasons had to be ‘good Men and true, man of Honor and Honesty, by whatever Denominations or Persuasions they may be distinguished.’ This proposition was translated in ritual language involving gestures, words, and objects, performed according to set sequence in the sequestered place of a masonic lodge. From this angle, Freemasonry is not exceptional. Almost every known culture has a depth dimension in cultural experiences toward some sort of ultimacy and transcendence that will provide norms and power for the rest of life. Freemasonry is the organization of life around the depth dimensions of experience—varied in form, completeness, and clarity in accordance with the environing culture. By proposing to use the religious language and ritual practice as the house Freemasons inhabit together and the language they speak, the masonic practice underlined that the followers may find direction and, indeed, transformation as they make their own story of their respect for the tradition. It intended to lead into a maturity that can handle self-questioning.

Masonic prayers

In the British hemisphere there is a further development in later regulations (the first post-Union *Book of Constitutions* of 1815), underling the religious dimension where it is ordained that ‘A lodge is duly formed; and after prayer, an ode in honor of masonry is sung.’ Masonic Prayers are a vital part of traditional freemasonry. Nonetheless, prayers voiced in Lodge meetings do not make the meeting a worship service. If so, then sessions of the U.S. Congress or the Scottish Parliament would be ‘worship services’ as a moderator, chaplain or invited clergy leads in prayer to open the session. At the same time prayers are fundamental masonic resources and important tools as part of a generative matrix for the moral and aesthetic masonic philosophy, moving morality into the inner private sphere, as expressed by one of the masonic closing prayers:

Supreme Grand Master! Ruler of Heaven and Earth! Now, that we are about to separate and return to our respective places of abode, wilt Thou be pleased so to influence our hearts and minds, that we may, each one of us, practice out of the Lodge those great moral duties which are inculcated in it, and, with reverence, study and obey the laws which Thou hast given us in Thy Holy Word. Amen.

Masonic prayers can be helpful in order to explore some theological key concepts representative of Masonic perceptions of the christian tradition. Prayer is regarded as one of the basic spiritual resources in most of the Lodges and includes numerous biblical references. The masonic ritual prayer practice reveal aspects of the fight against the loss of personhood, isolation from the Great Architect of the Universe and loss of community. Contrary to the general perception and despite its Biblical references, prayer is seen as a non-confessional utterance on which Freemasons can rely. It is noteworthy that while the lack of confessional engagement is one important aspect, it is nonetheless far from being exclusive. One can not neglect that in some rituals confessional elements seem to play a role. Here, considerable differences between English and continental/Latin American understandings on Freemasonry come into view as many Freemasons outside the English sphere of influence do not consider themselves religious. Rather they view alienation from some trends of religious inspired Freemasonry as a state of enlightenment, the intensity of which is increased by the move forwards to a real humanistic society.

Notwithstanding this situation, one may hope that trough unity in diversity Freemasonry seeks to celebrate how the movement can be stronger by welcoming confessional and biblical components together with purely humanistic elements. This has to be possible, if being a Humanist means trying to behave decently with the only difference that it is without expectation of rewards or punishment after dead. Freemasons are all equal in the fact that they are all different. They are all the same in the fact that they will never be the same. They are united by the reality that all colors and all cultures translated in Masonic ritual and practice, are distinct & individual. It suggests that far from being weakened by different philosophical, biblical and theological strands, Freemasonry is made stronger by acceptance of the many different contributions made by its constituent parts. Via this Unity in diversity Freemasonry seeks to move beyond mere tolerance of ethnic, cultural and religious divisions, but seeks to promote the idea that each distinct constituent part plays a valid contribution which strengthens the whole.

Conclusions

Out of all this emerges the outline of a masonic practice that imposes a demanding moral discipline, a sober and thoughtful style of meeting, a freedom constantly and without panic to have one's own integrity under scrutiny and to do the same for the community as a whole. Freemasons were not zealots seeking to expunge christianity from the human mind, or individualists committed to the autonomy of private conscience, or people determined to impose on all human society signs and rituals. Only the accidents of history have associated Freemasonry with all of these in various contexts even if some basic impulses might have fostered and encouraged these ideas. But if we are now seeking to articulate what is distinctive and valuable about the masonic legacy, it is necessary to disentangle them from the fundamental insights and questions of the founding fathers. There is undoubtedly a "tragic" element in the history of Freemasonry. Therefore it is imperative to take these questions serious and think about the insights of the Founding fathers as we reflect on what Freemasonry means within a relentlessly realistic framework. The religious factor is a fundamental element in this reflection.
