



Freemasonry: A Traditional Initiatic and Esoteric Order

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Freemasonry is a traditional initiatic organization, intended to transmit something of a spiritual nature to its initiates, and to provide a support for brethren on their spiritual journey in this life. The Rites of Freemasonry exist primarily to transform Masonic initiates “from this dead level to a living perpendicular,”¹ and when the rites are practiced in a regular, serious, and contemplative manner, special access to a higher realm of knowledge is possible. This traditional understanding is contrary to the modern materialistic way of seeing the world that is prevalent today. It is therefore very difficult for Masons to comprehend the esoteric meanings of Freemasonry. The modern mind limits access to the power of symbolism. The modern practice of Freemasonry often fails to achieve the fundamental *raison d'être* of the brotherhood. As a result, some Masons sense there is something more to the order than fellowship and public charity, and they devote tremendous energy trying to explain Freemasonry, its purpose and its meaning. Everyone expresses a different and clouded view, and unless Masons begin to understand tradition, they cannot begin to reveal the inner mysteries of Masonry, nor begin to practice it in a way that can fulfill its intended purpose.

The most common fallacy and barrier to realizing the order's potential is the false notion that Freemasonry is a product of the “Age of the Enlightenment.” This view expounds that the ideals of the “Age of Enlightenment” liberated humanity from the ignorance of superstition and religious oppression in the glorious march of scientific progress, and Freemasonry was one avenue for progress. This perspective is absolutely flawed, as Man prior to the “Age of Enlightenment” was not simply superstitious and ignorant, but rather Man looked at the world from a spiritual perspective, not a materialistic one. Nature speaks to traditional Man, while modern man reduces the world to a quantitative understanding, seeing only a collection of “lifeless matter”² and energy devoid of meaning and purpose. René Guénon states:

In every traditional civilization... every human activity of whatever kind is always regarded as derived essentially from principles... By this attachment to principles human activity could be said to be as it were 'transformed', and instead of being limited to what it is in itself, namely, a mere external manifestation, it is integrated with the tradition, and constitutes for those who carry it out an effective means of participation in the tradition, and this is as much as to say that

¹ Masonic 3rd Degree Ritual.

² Guénon, René. *The Reign of Quantity & the Signs of the Times*. Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001. p.52.

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it takes on a truly 'sacred' and 'ritual' character. That is why it can be said that, in any such civilization, 'every occupation is a priesthood'...

To see what is meant by the 'sacred' character of the whole of human activity, even only from an exterior or, if preferred, exoteric point of view, it is only necessary to consider a civilization like the Islamic, or the Christian civilization of the Middle Ages; it is easy to see that in them the most ordinary actions of life have something 'religious' in them. In such civilizations religion is not something restricted, narrowly bounded and occupying a place apart, without effective influence on anything else, as it is for modern Westerners (at least for those who still consent to admit religion at all); on the contrary it penetrates the whole existence of the human being, or better, it embraces within its domain everything which constitutes that existence, and particularly social life properly so called, so much that there is really nothing left that is 'profane', except in the case of those who for one reason or another are outside the tradition...³

The modern and historicist view would dismiss this assessment; however, from an esoteric perspective the Mysteries of Freemasonry, or of any authentic tradition, are perennial and mold their outer form to fit the context of the age. The medieval stone mason guilds were the vehicle through which the "tools and implements of architecture"⁴ and the Masonic Rites manifested as a "spiritual science."⁵ The spiritual science, initiation, and the Masonic Rites themselves are contrary to the materialistic and mechanistic view of the world that was idealized during the "Age of Enlightenment." The "Age of Enlightenment" was only an "enlightenment" in regards to the material world, while it was an age of growing spiritual poverty as Man turned away from the GAOTU and the profound spirituality in the West, which trace is left in the glory of the great Cathedrals.

Even in the early 18th century, Freemasonry served as a place of spiritual retreat, connecting brethren through a tradition – a spiritual transmission – to an ancient and timeless wisdom. The founding of the first Grand Lodge in 1717 A.D. was not the beginning of Freemasonry, but rather the progression into a large organization, when it went from being a selective and secret initiatic order into an organized and political institution. One might even say this was the beginning of a major decline in the practice of Freemasonry, as many of the "Ancients" purported.

The modern understanding of the word tradition is that it is effectively a synonym for the word "custom," when tradition has nothing whatsoever to do with social customs. Tradition is literally the transmission of sacred knowledge. The Latin root of the word tradition means "to hand down." The Christian religion refers to this same concept through the Apostolic succession, where priests have been sanctified by priests who go directly back in lineage to the Apostles and thus Christ himself. In Hinduism, the concept of *Sampradaya* is a close synonym to this understanding of tradition, where the master-disciple relationship and initiation into the *Guru-Kula*, or spiritual family, show many similarities to other initiatic orders, like Freemasonry. Once an aspirant has been initiated into an authentic *Sampradaya*, he or she is considered part of that tradition and lineage, a part of a sacred bond which cannot be broken. René Guénon writes, "...initiation of any degree represents for the being who receives it a permanent acquisition, a

³ Ibid. p.56.

⁴ Masonic 2nd Degree Ritual.

⁵ Ibid.

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state that virtually or effectively it has reached once and for all and that nothing can ever take away."⁶

Sacred knowledge can only be transmitted through an authentic initiation, because this sacred knowledge is completely incommunicable due to its highly esoteric nature, as it deals primarily with internal realities and spiritual realizations. "Initiation is essentially the transmission of a spiritual influence,"⁷ as René Guénon states. A Masonic lecture even states that "...through a succession of ages are transmitted, unimpaired, the most excellent tenants of our institution."⁸ A consequence of this spiritual influence is a greater understanding of sacred knowledge. The parables, metaphors, symbols, and allegories in Freemasonry are the external form of the spiritual influence, which awaken the intuitive capacities when contemplated.

Often the pursuit of these truths of a transcendent order is considered left to the realm of religion; however this is yet another modern misunderstanding. Religion as understood today is fundamentally exoteric, that is, outwardly focused. Religion is meant to serve the society in which it thrives, while an authentic traditional initiation is purely esoteric, or inward, and is only accessible for a few who are prepared. Freemasonry is not a religion, but is a spiritual tradition that goes beyond the realm of religion. While there may be an overlap with some aspects of religion, such as prayer, death, resurrection, and the afterlife, Freemasonry is not limited to exoteric dogma.

Freemasonry is essentially esoteric, and the confusion between the Craft and religion is founded upon the confusion between the exoteric and the esoteric dimensions. Seyyed Hossein Nasr in his book *Knowledge and the Sacred* clarifies this difference:

Esotericism is that inward dimension of tradition which addresses the inner man... It is hidden because of its very nature and accessible to only the few because in this stage of human history only the few remain aware of the inner dimensions of their nature; the rest live on the periphery of the circle of their own existence, oblivious to the Center which is connected by the esoteric dimension of tradition to the circumference or periphery. The esoteric is the radius which provides the means of going from the circumference to the Center, but it is not available to all because not everyone is willing or qualified to undertake the journey to the Center in this life. To follow the exoteric dimension of religion, however, is to remain on the circumference and hence in a world which has a center, and to remain qualified to carry out the journey to the Center in the afterlife, the beatific vision being only a posthumous possibility from the exoteric point of view.⁹

The spiritual influence, which is transmitted through Masonic initiation is fundamentally incommunicable and esoteric.¹⁰ This is why Masonic ritual and symbols are not only what they seem on the surface, but include a profound hidden knowledge that is only discovered when truly contemplated and put into practice. One of the ritual definitions of Freemasonry is "a course of

⁶ Guénon, René. *Perspectives on Initiation*. Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001. p.107.

⁷ Ibid. p.48.

⁸ Masonic 2nd Degree Ritual.

⁹ Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *Knowledge and the Sacred*. Albany: State University of New York, 1989. p.77.

¹⁰ Not all Masonic initiations may be effective when actually conferred, and are most often only virtual. That being said, it is possible for the authentic initiation to take place years after the virtual initiation as a result of participation in the Rites, if the proper conditions are present in both the Lodge and the individual receiving the spiritual influence.

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ancient hieroglyphic and moral instructions, taught according to ancient usages, by types, emblems and allegorical figures."¹¹ The Masters of ages past did not fancy elaborate ceremonies to enjoy themselves with mental gymnastics; the rituals and symbols were adopted out of a necessity to transmit "wise and serious truths"¹², and the only way to do it so "future brethren might find out the Rite"¹³ was to use allegories, symbols, and ritual movements as vehicles for the mysteries, that is, vehicles for the spiritual influence. What is transmitted in Masonic Rites is ineffable, and is only known internally. The methods of transmission for the spiritual influence were through rituals and symbolism of operative Masonry.

We live in an age of tremendous spiritual confusion, and it is not easy to revert to a traditional understanding. We live in a time when society has completely lost an understanding of tradition, authentic initiation, and the original purpose of Freemasonry. We live in a society and a time when the pursuit of greater spiritual awakening is lacking, and where ancient thought and practices are considered "primitive" compared to our current high state of material understanding. We live in an age of spiritual poverty in the midst of our material prosperity. Unfortunately, the modern perspective is a complete rejection of the importance of tradition and the sacred knowledge embedded within it. This is why it is so important that efforts to revitalize the practice of Freemasonry be cognizant of the importance of tradition – a great lineage that transmits a spiritual influence. Freemasonry has the imprints of a previous age when a traditional understanding was still present. Freemasonry is a receptacle of sacred knowledge that is still alive, although barely realized, in our modern world. René Guénon states, "...a degeneration of an initiatic organization changes nothing with regard to its essential nature, and that the continuity of the transmission itself suffices to render a restoration always possible should more favorable circumstances arise..."¹⁴ Freemasonry has the potential to transform its initiates into what is called True Man or the Master Mason. However, the full potential of Freemasonry will not be possible unless the practice of Freemasonry is restored to incorporate an understanding and respect of tradition, because Freemasonry without tradition is like a house built on sand.

¹¹ Masonic 1st Degree Ritual.

¹² Masonic 3rd Degree Ritual.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Guénon, René. *Perspectives on Initiation*. Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001. p.191.