

**INSTRUCTION IN SYMBOLISM**

**27<sup>th</sup> Degree Essay**

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In writing the Scottish Rite Degree rituals and developing the Magnum Opus and Morals and Dogma, Albert Pike took on two monumental tasks. The tasks of preparing the rituals and lectures for the Degrees was probably made even more daunting for Pike because he had some materials handed to him to begin with. Stated more plainly, he may have had an easier task if there had been nothing at all for him to start with, or from.

The enormity of the total content of the rituals and lectures cannot be overstated. We don't know of course how Pike actually mapped out this content with respect to each of the Degrees, at least not to the extent that we can form a thorough or even complete depiction of his thought process as it applied across the Degrees. Since we don't know, we will proceed with some speculation. What follows then is an imagining of how Pike may have proceeded with his work, which would have resulted in the putting off of any detailed instruction concerning Masonic symbolism until the 27<sup>th</sup> Degree (formerly the 28<sup>th</sup> Degree).

We begin with a great collection of what Pike no doubt considered to be the grand lessons of life as they had been preserved in the written record. This collection consisted of the writings of many individuals in many languages; and the works were in various states of originality (and decay). Pike's collection seems to have been very complete. Certainly that must have been his perception, at least. And, he spared no effort to become skilled in the several languages of the ancients.

This collection of works included philosophy, religion, science, politics and general history itself. The collection may be said to be mankind, reflected by the seven liberal arts and sciences. We know with some certainty the extent of his library when he developed the revised rituals and lectures during the mid- to late- nineteenth century. We also know that some important elements of the written record were actually missing all together from his collection. An important example is the writing of the world's oldest civilization, the Sumerians. These most ancient works were being recovered and deciphered during the very years that Pike was writing the Magnum Opus and Morals and Dogma. One can only hope that if any future attempt is sanctioned by the Scottish Rite to revise Morals and Dogma, that a full accounting would be made of the many and great contributions brought forth by this first civilization.

The second set of tools Pike probably arranged on his desk consisted of a listing of the important duties and virtues he believed to be essential for persons both to respect, and to revere. Then began what may have been Pike's most difficult task; that of relating the great library of life's lessons to the lists of duties and virtues. The two collections may have been merged as a two, or perhaps more likely a three, dimensional matrix. This merging was a difficult undertaking which has left some scars, none of which were fatal to his work. A better job might be done today but not without the example Pike has lain before us to follow. No one would even undertake the task if there were no evidence for possible success.

With the imaginary matrix complete, Pike then attempted to spread its contents across the Degrees. But this in all likelihood met with failure, prompting Pike to make major

changes and additions. And, when it was complete, Pike discovered that he had some leftovers. He then spread these materials over the Degrees a second time, using what can only be described as additional doses of compression and expansion.

The resulting product was not smooth and was no doubt confusing even to Pike, himself. He needed something more to aid readers in their understanding. He needed some cement to hold things together; but what was there that he might use? Hadn't he used all that there was?

Pike had not yet applied much Masonic, or even any non-Masonic, symbolism. He found this existing Masonic symbolism; along with all that he might borrow from other sources, to be the missing and essential ingredient for this great work. Symbols would serve not only to help educate and explain; but equally would serve as a memory device for Scottish Rite Masons who were to undertake serious study of his work. And surely he intended for serious study of his work to be undertaken. In fact he expected future Scottish Rite Masons to read and make every possible effort to understand what he had worked so diligently to create. In the end, if the readers chose not to believe what he had written, that was fine too.

Some evidence supporting Pike's possible use of symbolism to cement his work may be found in the early Degrees, where he clearly redefines the symbols to suit his matrix of information, and for teaching the Scottish Rite Mason. Early in his writing of the lecture for the 1<sup>st</sup> Degree, Pike takes issue with the simple understanding of the rough and smooth Ashlars presented by the York Rite, providing the reader of *Morals and Dogma* with his own Scottish Rite interpretation. Pike also found an abundance of symbols in his collection of the great works of mankind. The New Testament Book of Revelation provided, for example, a true wealth of symbolism for Pike to apply to his ritual and lectures. We find these symbols easily in more than one Degree.

All symbols lend themselves to various interpretations. Like beauty, so to speak, the meaning is in the eye of the beholder. Knowing this, Pike introduced symbols as he proceeded through the Degrees giving them meanings and remembrances which suited his immediate Degree specific circumstances. Thus he used many of the same symbols over and over. For example, the simple symbol of the circle is cited by Pike in seven Degrees from the 3<sup>rd</sup> through the 30<sup>th</sup>.

Pike also resorted to using the teachings of most of the world's religions through out the Degrees. In doing so he settled on the notion that a Deity of three aspects could be found in many or even most of the ancient teachings. This notion can be found sprinkled about among the Scottish Rite Degrees.

At some point Pike may have stepped back from his work, examined his collection of historical works and lists of duties and virtues all cemented with symbolism and realized that the total of his work had become disjointed. There were strings of some loosely tied, some untied altogether.

Pike truly understood what his mission in writing was all about, which enabled him to find a suitable way for salvaging his work, a way to lift it from apparent failure to a shining success. Pike used the 27<sup>th</sup> Degree to bind the strings into a strong cord. He took the time (the pages) needed to more thoroughly explain the symbolism and to make what was to him a notion, into the important finding in the world literature about the triple aspect of Deity. With the symbolism, Pike did not overly specify the meanings, preferring instead to let the readers hold on to as much of their own interpretations as possible. He simply added to the collection of meanings. Pike was not as considerate of his readers when it came to revealing his own religious beliefs; but that is another matter.

Returning to the matter of why Pike left his instruction on symbolism incomplete through the first twenty six Degrees, we can imagine two reasons for this. First, that he could not provide more detail as he went along from Degree to Degree without including digressing detail; and second, that he needed to have something (symbols) that could be carried along through the Degrees, that would enable him to add new and additional meanings as he went. The symbols are handholds where each has to support more than one, some several, meanings for the readers.

At some point he had to end this; but, he could not put off the ending to the finish. The completion of Pike's work to the finish, was to be reserved for something else to something that was far more important than any symbol. Pike's decision to wrap up his explanation of symbols and his evidence for the three aspects of Deity required more than two hundred pages, one-fourth of his *Morals and Dogma*. The sheer length of the 27<sup>th</sup> Degree reveals the importance Pike attached to its content and to his recognition for the need to gather the loose ends. In all likelihood he did not anticipate that this would be the case.

In fairness to Pike, The length of the 27<sup>th</sup> Degree was in large part due to his including discussions of what he referred to as Kabalistic theory. In summary the 27<sup>th</sup> Degree serves as an integrator for much of the material which preceded it. Even to include a statement that the reference to the 47<sup>th</sup> problem of Euclid in *Blue Lodge Masonry* is out of place there.