



THE GREAT DECEIT OF THE THEORY OF AN “ENLIGHTENED FREEMASONRY”

*Allocution taken by the Grand Lodge on the 12th December 2009 from the
Grand Master of the Regular Grand Lodge of Italy Fabio Venzi*

Of all the theories that have harmed and proved particularly damaging to a correct understanding of Freemasonry, one of the most commonly acknowledged maintains that the origins of Freemasonry derive from the Enlightenment movement. This theory purports that an esoteric-initiatic society originates from a school of thought based on empiricism and positivism.

As I wrote in a recent essay, I personally do not believe that Freemasonry expresses the philosophy underlying the Enlightenment movement, but is rather the daughter of the Neoplatonic system, therefore far removed from the empiricism and rationalism of the eighteenth century that are clearly incompatible with the esoteric and metaphysical principles of Freemasonry. Thus, the origins of the latter more likely represent a phenomenon that developed as a “reaction” to modernity, and to all the ensuing consequences, with the aim of re-establishing contacts with the metaphysical world.

Indeed, the Masonic “method” makes use of a symbolic language to express the integration, denied from the time of René Descartes onwards, between mind and matter, an esoteric language differing from philosophic and scientific languages as for its way of communicating by means of images intended to arouse knowledge through “intuition” rather than by rational means.

This “intellectual intuition” constitutes the instrument, the method on which the Masonic process is based, a method facilitating the implementation of an active process of inner transformation leading to the development of an actual change in status in, and this is the fundamental issue, a “personal” rather than a “social” context. The aim is to be reunited with the Supreme Being, and in doing so free oneself of material bonds (“metals”), thereby becoming a spiritual entity.

However, the theory whereby Freemasonry is the offspring of the eighteenth-century movement of enlightenment and progressivism is hard to eradicate, and the damage produced by this forcing of history has been considerable. Undeniably, during the eighteenth century several Masonic societies introduced principles pertaining to the

school of thought of the Enlightenment into the realms of Freemasonry, thereby distorting the esoteric and initiatic origins. These were however only sporadic occurrences.

The most outstanding case was that of the Grand Orient of France, the oldest French Masonic Obedience, which increasingly absorbed the ideals of the Enlightenment movement, so much so as to ultimately remove, in 1877, all reference to the Great Architect of the Universe from its rituals. Indeed, rituals performed by the Grand Orient of France display clear features reminiscent of enlightenment and progressivism. Merely as an example, the ceremony performed on occasion of the “Inauguration” of a Temple, contains the wording the “flame is the symbol of Reason (capital letters)” and “let the Flaming Star lead us towards progress (reason and progress being the singular features of Enlightenment), the ritual moreover being perpetually articulated by the triptych “Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité”. There are no Prayers, Invocations, Bible readings, walkabouts and esoteric formulas, none of the features observed in the Anglo-Saxon Masonic ceremonies; furthermore, the ceremony concerned is no longer even known as “consecration”, with all that the term implies from an esoteric-initiatic point of view, but is now called “Inauguration”, a term of undeniably “profane” connotations.

It can thus be asserted that during the eighteenth century “several” Masonic bodies in Europe included the enlightenment principles in their rituals, thus distorting their esoteric and initiatic origins. In these cases the ritual, an indispensable element in an initiatic organisation, has been gradually deprived of its true symbolic significance and replaced by commentaries and exegeses characterised by a desolating banality and a dull moralism reminiscent of the “century of the Enlightened.” All this of course does not apply to the entire eighteenth century society of European Freemasonry.

The Enlightenment was a vast spiritual movement (of culture) that first developed in England during the eighteenth century and subsequently extended to France and the rest of the European continent. The movement was denoted for its unerring faith in reason and the capacity of the latter to emancipate mankind from religious fanaticism and, particularly, to free it from ignorance and superstition. The Enlightenment focused on the study of daily, mundane issues, reducing knowledge to the mere data gained from experience. It is clear therefore that a school of thought that tends towards a process of perfection based on symbolisms and allegories such as that adopted by Freemasonry has little in common with the experimental nature of the empiricism of the Enlightenment.

Let us now consider some of the main characteristics of the enlightenment principles and analyse the lack of common issues with the principles and singularities on which an Initiatic Organisation is based. First of all “Empiricism”, a new philosophy which, in the same way as science is based on experience, maintains that all ideas and principles are unequivocally derived from experience. Intellect is conceived as a blank slate on which the marks made by experience are gradually etched, thereby refuting the existence of innate ideas. The latter is unacceptable to Freemasons for whom the concept of “Religio Perennis” (a “transcendental unity”, primordial wisdom in which the various forms of

religion that contemplate manifestation of a divine entity are not mutually exclusive and do not propose different truths, the truth being one alone) referred to in justifying tolerance towards all creeds divergent from their own, is indeed based on an "innate" predisposition of mankind to the "Sacred". An "Anti-metaphysical agnosticism" according to which experience is an action strictly limited to actual facts, consequently incapable of reaching the very essence of things, and totally unable to comprehend anything pertaining to the suprasensitive. It ensues that the true metaphysics is thus excluded, whilst, as we are well aware, intellectual intuition, the source of the Masonic method, is necessarily based on metaphysics, the pure intellectual knowledge of universal principles, transcendent, superrational wisdom. On the contrary, the characteristics of modern thought and of the essentially atheist Freemasonry that sought inspiration from the latter, represent the absence of metaphysical knowledge, the negation of all forms of knowledge diverse from scientific dogma. Accordingly, one of the major concepts underlying Initiatic Organisations, the secret, becomes totally incomprehensible, not being able to grasp the essentially symbolic value of the latter, referred rather to an inner initiatic secret that is "revealed" solely through spiritual development and which, due to its inexpressible nature, cannot be communicated to others. Metaphysical truths can never be wholly expressed, thus hindering the clear defining of metaphysics in view of its boundless essence. The inexpressible may be effectively grasped and conceived by means of intellectual intuition within the limits of one's personal intellectual capacities, but it cannot be conveyed to others. In conclusion, it represents the true essence of the initiatic secret.

Let us subsequently proceed to examine "Rationalism" and "Anti-historicism". The thinkers of the Age of Enlightenment, based on the premises that truth can only be secured from experience, tradition, the voice of the past, maintained that the authority exerted by the ancient thinkers could only cause harm as it constituted a prejudice hindering a clear unimpeded vision of reality and truth. Within the realms of Freemasonry however the knowledge contemplated by the traditional doctrines is intellective, symbolic and synthetic, with intellect being deemed superior to colloquial reasoning, thus providing mankind with a diverse, higher-reaching form of sensitive life. Furthermore, as a consequence of their anti-historic attitude the enlightened took it upon themselves to re-assess the roots, the virgin soul of knowledge; prior to the eighteenth century there had only been errors, barbarisms, obscurantism. But Freemasonry is a form of "Tradition"; and similar to all traditional forms maintains all aspects present from "the start", unchanged by the ravages of time, thereby diverging from the profane world constantly open to change. In the context of "Tradition" the transmitting of primary principles occurs in a vertical fashion, from superhumans to humans, a concept totally unacceptable to the Enlightenment.

The means best suited to instilling knowledge of higher order, religious or metaphysical truths is represented by symbolism, a tool that has been rejected or ignored by the modern world but which is perfectly suited to expressing truths belonging to the order of

pure intellectuality. Human nature is by no means purely intellectual, but is characterised by the need of a sensitive foundation to aspire to elevation to a higher order. Symbolism is well suited to the intellectual needs of mankind, being an analytical, colloquial language resembling human reasoning of which it is a tool. Conversely, symbolism is essentially synthetic, and for this reason is intuitive. These characteristics imply an increased suitability compared to the spoken language in lending support to intellectual intuition. Being of a synthetic nature, symbolism affords the possibility of a truly unlimited wealth of conceptions, proving superior to spoken language characterised by more specifically defined meanings imposing considerable limitations on one's intellect.

The last aspect to be considered is "Relativism". Our ideas are all closely linked to external impressions and to the associations formed by the latter, they are undeniably moulded on experience. Therefore, these ideas could actually vary from their current status if our experience and the behaviour of phenomena were to change. If they are not based on a universal, eternally constant, firm foundation, not linked to worldly occurrences (in the same way as platonic or divine ideas) no reference can be made to good or bad, beautiful or ugly, true or false things and qualities. Everything is relative, nothing is absolute. Indeed, the latter is one of the accusations moved by the Catholic Church against Freemasonry, although it is, as I have already had occasion to underline in a Conference focusing on this topic, totally groundless. The entire Masonic ritual is a journey undertaken with the sole aim of seeking the "truth".

Incredibly, it was Lennhoff, a scholar of Freemasonry to first apply the term "relativist" to the Masonic school of thought, thereby providing the Catholic Church with the opportunity, punctually exploited several decades later, to use this inanity against the Masonic society. Indeed, a book written by Lennhoff, "International Lexicon of Freemasonry" was included among the texts presented by the Grand Lodge of Germany to the German Episcopal Conference to evaluate the presence of elements of incompatibility between the Catholic Church and Freemasonry. The book by Lennhoff and Posner states that "Freemasonry may therefore be conceived as a movement aimed at attracting men of relativistic tendencies". Thus, in 1980, following six years of discussions with representatives of the United Grand Lodge of Germany, the conclusions reached by the German Episcopal Conference maintained that one of the six items of incompatibility between the Church and Freemasonry was provided by "relativism", "*essentia massoneriae est relativismus et subjectivismus, ersiae negatur obiectiva veritatis cognitio*", as reported in "Quaesitum est", the Declaration on Masonic Associations dated November 26th 1983.

Yet others have defined the Masonic school of thought as deist, which is even more ridiculous. It is an established fact that in the deist doctrine there is no place for a relationship between God and man; God exists but is in no way involved in the historic events of man. Then how can the constant reference to the assistance of the Grand Architect of the universe in our rituals be explained, and particularly how can it be

overlooked that the key Masonic documents: Three Distinct Knocks (1760) and Jachin and Boaz (1762) contain reference to “Christian Prayers”, together with the recurring mention of the fact that Lodges are “dedicated” to Saint John? Not forgetting moreover the Royal Arch in which we address the “True and Living God Most High”, therefore to a “personal” theistic God.

The disasters provoked by books such as the one written by Lennhoff are incalculable; the latter author maintained that Masonic rituals were in no way associated with knowledge “concerning the ultimate questions of being”, underlining that if Masonry had any esoteric secret it was surely of an ethical nature, focusing on a spiritual agreement between Masons throughout the entire world, all pertaining to humanity and tolerance. However, among the theories that have most affected the correct interpretation of Freemasonry, those put forward by the writer Margaret Jacob should not be overlooked. Even worse, Ms. Jacob, a historian, is considered one of the leading experts of the history of Freemasonry.

In providing an example of the absurd theories advanced by Jacob we are indeed spoilt for choice, ranging from “It would seem that the constitutional and legislative environment was what attracted men on the Continent to the first lodges. Within their confines brothers adjudicated new forms of personal power and they could imagine themselves as involved in governance as well as in opposition.” “Those historians who have emphasized only the democratic elements in Masonic government miss the obvious: The lodges mirrored the old order just as they were creating a form of civil society that would ultimately replace it.”, “Masonic discourse, in whatever western European language, although permitting the expression of local interests and circumstances, did so within the framework of a rhetoric that was British in origin as well as invariably civic, hence political, and most frequently progressive and reformist.”, “Certainly the historical phenomenon of freemasonry has significance in the interesting similarity of its rhetoric with that of the first modern democratic and radical movements. But we shall approach it for what it can tell us about the eighteenth-century Enlightenment”, “For all of its strengths it misses the distinctively civic quality of masonic sociability – its building of the polity within sociability, the political content of its moral vision and its discourse; its imitation and initiation of form of governance, not lest its quasi-religious quality.”, “The point about the Masonic impulse wherever we find it is that it strove to be political.”, “It is the contention of this book that the Masonic experience in every western European context, from Edinburg to Berlin, from the 1730s to the 1780s, was resolutely civil and hence political.”. And conclude with her absurd theory about the origin of English Freemasonry :“These small private societies came to be seen as organized around a constitution in the post-1688, or parliamentary, sense of that term. The goal of government by consent within the context of subordination to “legitimate” authority was vigorously pursued by the Grand Lodge of London and was demanded of all lodges affiliated with it...the lodges practiced a civil administration, derived from British political practice and tradition. Predictably in a British context

lodges were, on the whole, remarkably supportive of established institutions, of church and state”.

However, the most incredible theory is undoubtedly constituted by Ms. Jacob’s account of the reasons underlying the exclusion of women from initiation into the Masonic Obediences. In the words of Ms Jacob Freemasons “And throughout the century they will be harassed by charges of libertinism and sodomy. Partly in response, freemasons would alternatively encourage women’s participation and seek to exclude them. In the eyes of their frequently clerical opponents the reason for this exclusion was simple: Why would women wish to be involved in the practices of government?”. There is no need for further comment.

Throughout the entire text there is no explicit reference to rituals, to their esoteric and initiatic content, absolutely nothing. Freemasonry is reduced to a mere association on a par with numerous others, Ms. Jacob never entertains the thought that it originated as an “Initiatic Organisation”, featuring all the peculiarities this implies, and it is therefore a serious mistake to treat Freemasonry in the same way as an insignificant association. Indeed, although deviations from the original model may have occurred, these can certainly not be generalised to the entire European Freemasonry. However, Ms. Jacob again emphasises that “Certain characteristics of Masonic association differ not at all from the many other private societies that sprang up throughout Europe in the course of the eighteenth century. Members, proposed and chosen by other members, paid dues, attended meetings, voted and discussed, gave loyalty, and sought conviviality, if not self-improvement, from their association.”, and I wish to underline, “in some cases”! The initiatic process is seen as an incidental component, someone will occasionally decide to take into account the esoteric component of symbols present in the Lodge and in the rituals carried out, but the issue of major interest is to “They taught men to speak in public, to keep records, to pay “taxes”, to be tolerant, to debate freely, to vote, to moderate their feasting.

”. What need was there therefore to consecrate Temples and Lodges, to create rituals and symbols with such deep esoteric and philosophic connotations, to wear vestments, merely to achieve aims that could have been accomplished in any club.

To conclude, in my opinion the theory maintaining that, as the Masonic Brotherhood aspires to the achieving of a progressive degree of ethical perfection this must necessarily be based on the enlightenment philosophy, particularly in view of the idea of progress held by the latter, and that Lodges represent a clear manifestation of eighteenth century progressivism, is totally misguided.

The unconditioned trust displayed in the value and powers of science has indeed led to progress on a technical level, not, regrettably, corresponding to a similar progress in spiritual life. The idea of indefinite progress, stemming from the enlightenment thinking, has come true only with regard to “material” progress, not associated to a parallel

progress on a “moral” plane.