

Freemasonry and Esoteric Movements

By Frater I.D.V.A.

We all know, of course, what Freemasonry is. The United Grand Lodge of England, in a leaflet published by the Board of General Purposes in 1984, defines it as:

One of the world's oldest secular fraternal societies ... a society of men concerned with spiritual values. Its members are taught its precepts by a series of ritual dramas, which follow ancient forms and use stonemason's customs and tools as allegorical guides. The essential qualification for admission and continuing membership is a belief in a Supreme Being. Membership is open to men of any race or religion who can fulfil the essential qualification and are of good repute ... (*What is Freemasonry ?*)

Now this is fine as far as it goes but we all know - or think that we know - that there is more to it than this. Does not Freemasonry have an esoteric side reserved for the elect?; are there not secret doctrines hidden within the symbolism of the ceremonies ?; are not the ceremonies of Initiation, Passing and Raising quintessential rites of passage, with a basic structure having elements in common with similar rituals of other cultures distant in both time and space ? To the last question I would answer 'yes', but to the others I give a decided 'No'.

Freemasonry is avowedly concerned with morality. Its symbols are interpreted for the candidate in moral terms (thus, when the working tools are displayed in the first degree, the candidate is told that 'we apply these tools to our morals') and its ceremonies are effectively morality plays, stressing particular virtues. Of course one can argue that the Third Degree is both a morality and a *mortality* play, in that the candidate is reminded of his mortality when he is raised - he is *not* symbolically resurrected from the dead, any more than Hiram Abiff (whose sterling qualities of courage, integrity and steadfastness the candidate is taught to emulate) is literally raised from the dead in the traditional history that is related during the course of the ceremony. Hiram Abiff is simply decently re-interred with the honour and respect due to him.

But what of the Tracing Boards ? Are there not esoteric interpretations of the symbolism in these complex visual images ? Undoubtedly there are, but they are not masonic. The explanations given in the rituals of the three Craft degrees relate solely to the legends of those degrees and to the symbols that the candidate encounters in the course of the ceremonies. Of course, some of you may dissent from this statement – which is in effect simply my informed opinion – and I have, on occasion, given an explanation of the symbolism of the Tracing Boards that takes in other, non-masonic interpretations of the individual images, but that has never been in open lodge unless it has been ‘called off’.

It is also possible to argue that what I am discussing is the Freemasonry of 1717 and afterwards, and that the esoteric wisdom of the pre-Grand Lodge era is another matter. But is it ? Nowhere in the Old Charges - the manuscript *Constitutions of Masonry* that predate, for the most part, the founding of the Premier Grand Lodge - do we find any trace of secret doctrines. There are Obligations to maintain secrecy, there are Catechisms, with explanations of the signs, tokens and words, and unsophisticated rituals of the Craft degrees, but that is all: secret teachings there are none.

If it *is* the case that Freemasonry is simply and solely a system of moral teachings, inculcated in dramatic and catechetical form, then how has it come to be so firmly linked in the popular mind with true secret societies, and with the doctrines and practices of the myriad forms of occultism ? This state of affairs has come about, or so I believe, by misunderstanding and by historical accident. Let us try to determine how.

As far as we can tell Freemasonry in its present form derives from a very loosely associated group of masonic lodges that derived in turn, in form and structure, if not in substance, and in a manner which we only imperfectly understand, from associations of operative masons. These masonic bodies of the mid to late 17th Century were not at all concerned with stone working; their purpose seems rather to have been to practise and to promote mutual tolerance between men who, for reasons of political and religious allegiance, might otherwise have remained perpetually at a distance. [I should here point out that other theories of the origin of Freemasonry have been advanced over the last two hundred years. Some have argued for a derivation from ancient Egypt, others have claimed that Freemasonry descends from the Knights

Templar or from the Rosicrucians, but none of those proposing these theories have offered any sound evidence, documentary or otherwise].

The identity of these 17th Century members remains almost entirely unknown, and any solid proof of their ecumenical motives has yet to be found. Even so, some significant concern with tolerance in a most intolerant era seems to have been the driving force that motivated these proto-masons. What ceremonies they observed, if any, we do not know - although given the human psycho-spiritual need for ritual it is at least possible that they sought to construct a secular substitute for the elaborate Catholic liturgy that was lost at the time of the Reformation - nor do we know what symbols they employed beyond those associated with building in general (the working tools) and with one building in particular (King Solomon's Temple).

That they were all believing, orthodox Christians seems certain - there is no evidence to the contrary - although they were probably drawn from the three major divisions of the Christian faith then to be found in this country: Anglican (or true in both doctrine and liturgical practice); Roman Catholic (defective in doctrine); and Dissenting (defective in both doctrine *and* practice) [You will rightly perceive that these subjective qualifications reflect my own preference for what constitutes true Christianity] Be that as it may, this proto-Masonry did not include non-Christians: there were no Jewish brethren before 1721, and it harboured neither pantheists, nor pagans, nor atheists. And if these men engaged in philosophical speculation, then we have no record of it. What can be said, and even this is no more than a strong probability, is that they sought to ensure that England became and remained a cohesive and relatively tolerant society at peace with itself (that in the early years of the Premier Grand Lodge there were both Jacobite and loyalist freemasons tends to support this view). Change came when Speculative Freemasonry was exported to the continent.

In France, in Germany and in the Habsburg Empire, Freemasonry was taken up with gusto by the aristocracy but it was viewed in a different and very un-English light. While for us it was an instrument of egalitarianism and social cohesion, Freemasonry for continental aristocrats was to become a sign of their elitism. Not content with simple morality plays, or with emulating artisans, these European freemasons grafted

on the ethos, legends and presumed rituals of the old Orders of Chivalry. In this they had been inspired by the Oration of the Chevalier Ramsay, first delivered in 1737. Ramsay maintained that Freemasonry had descended not from operative stone masons, but from knights returning from the Crusades - he did not attribute it to the Knights Templar - and he offered no hint of any esoteric doctrines. He may have hoped that this would make the Order acceptable to the papacy, but if that was so then he signally failed: in 1738, after the promulgation of the anti-masonic papal Bull, *In Eminente*, Ramsay's Oration was publicly burned at Rome. After this event Ramsay disappeared from the masonic scene, valuing loyalty to his Church above his enthusiasm for the Craft.

This attribution to Freemasonry of an elite origin, and the hostility of the papacy (which had, four hundred years before, disbanded the Knights Templar and burned their Grand Master) *may* have led some continental masons to look upon Freemasonry as a suitable vehicle for transmitting secret doctrines of their own devising. And given that a form of Rosicrucianism, the Brotherhood of the Golden and Rosy Cross, based upon alchemical practices, was active in Germany after 1710, it is possible that the Rosicrucian myth with its secret vault and mysterious book, was grafted, in part if not in whole, upon some altered, chivalric form of Freemasonry. Altered still further such a version of Freemasonry *may* lie behind the establishment in England of either or both the Royal Arch and the Royal Order of Scotland, but again, there is no documentary evidence of this. But could such a hybrid still justly be called Freemasonry, or had it become an esoteric movement ?

Even if it had, its return to prosaic English society with its traditional, robust form of Freemasonry would have strangled any tender, esoteric vine it might have contained. What happened on the continent was another matter. Craft masonry was both widespread and orthodox, but there was also a proliferation of *Hauts Grades*, Higher Degrees that owed little to Masonry and much to esotericism. Should these be categorised as esoteric movements, and did they then or at a later date exercise an influence upon the ethos and practice of true Freemasonry ?

Before attempting to answer these questions it is about time that I defined the term 'esoteric movements'. I have deliberately avoided the more specific and narrow terms

of 'secret society' or 'Hermetic' or 'Esoteric Order', not so that I can be like Humpty Dumpty and make the words mean just what I say they mean, but in order to include institutions that are not predicated upon ceremonial working as well as those that are. So, what is an esoteric movement ? Essentially it is an institution (one of the 'instituted mysteries' in A.E. Waite's words) that forms a legitimate part of the Western Mystery Tradition; in other words, it is a communal spiritual path that seeks to undo the Fall of Man, to return to the presence of God and to attain the union of the created with its creator. Its doctrines are an exposition of the nature of the Fall and of the Way of Return, while its practices are concerned with actively finding that Way. A definition that I once gave of the secret part of the Mysteries of Eleusis, will also fit the practices of most esoteric movements, which are

designed to bring the initiate to an awareness of the holy and of the timeless state in which it exists, and for him to gain a secret wisdom which must not be shared with the outside, uninitiated world (R.A. Gilbert, *Elements of Mysticism*, 1991, pp4-5)

One might add that such secret wisdom entailed a means of access to a *gnosis*, a secret knowledge that helped the initiate to understand the mechanics of the fall (however it may have been expressed mythologically) and to comprehend the relationship between the spiritual and material worlds, their distinct natures, and the correspondences that exist between them.

Thus defined, Esoteric Movements could include such diverse institutions as the Cathar Church of the early Middle Ages, which had doctrines and rituals reserved for its *perfecti*; the Rosicrucian Fraternity, which may never have had any outward, objective existence before 1710; the Philadelphian Society of the late 17th Century, which was not a secret society, but whose doctrines were secret by virtue of being incomprehensible to the uninitiated; and the secret, esoteric Order *par excellence*, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. But they could not include Freemasonry.

Freemasonry does not seek to dictate the faith of its members, and while it offers the hope of a future life, it does not seek a return to, or attainment of organic unity with God. Its ceremonies are designed to inculcate moral messages in the candidate, not to stimulate a numinous experience. So were the *Hauts Grades* esoteric or masonic ?

They seem to have been something of a hybrid: leaning towards Freemasonry in form and structure, and towards esotericism in substance, *i.e.* in their philosophical and spiritual content. Out of such hybrids some true esoteric movements were certainly born. Sigmund Richter's Gold and Rosy Cross of 1710 was reborn in 1757, with rituals clearly based on masonic forms but with a doctrinal content that was wholly alchemical (in the sense of spiritual alchemy) and kabbalistic. It survived until the end of the 18th century but never took root in this country; indeed, English Masonry remained firmly prosaic throughout the quarrels, divisions and final grand Union of its first one hundred years.

Such esoteric activity as took place in England in the 18th Century was discreet and low-key; there were no obvious equivalents of the *Hauts Grades*, no organised Rosicrucianism and no neo-gnostic Societies. Was this because Freemasonry was more congenial to the English temperament ? Possibly, but Britain was also one United Kingdom, without the plethora of petty principalities and multiplicity of socially stratified courtiers. For the most part only those who can afford to spend time on esoteric pursuits actually take them up and in this country there were simply not enough educated and financially independent men and women to engage in unorthodox spiritual paths. As religious, political and social emancipation gradually progressed in the 19th Century, but much faster than was the case in Europe, for all that it was gradual, so were true esoteric movements established in this country.

Many of them, such as the Behmenist groups around James Pierrepont Greaves and Edward and Anne Penny, had no ceremonial content and did not draw from Freemasonry. Even for ceremonial magicians and practical occultists such as Ebenezer Sibly and Frederick Hockley, there was no crossover between their masonic and esoteric pursuits - and certainly no fusion of them. Here, having referred to Sibly, I should point out that some of the progenitors of what are today clearly masonic Additional Degrees were worked in England by a small number of freemasons who had entered these degrees in continental Europe and brought them back to this country. Although such systems as the Rite of Seven Degrees were masonic, the symbolism that they employed had very obvious esoteric overtones. They were also degrees unrecognised by Grand Lodge, even though not actively forbidden.

After the Union of the two Grand Lodges in 1813, the additional degrees were effectively suppressed. Not until the dead hand of the Duke of Sussex was lifted from English Freemasonry could any meaningful attempt be made to introduce, or re-introduce, such degrees to this country. And when they were introduced, starting with the Ancient & Accepted Rite in 1845, they remained firmly in orthodox masonic hands and maintained a strict masonic ethos. Only with the founding of the masonic Rosicrucian Society, the Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia, in 1866 was there a serious attempt to unite esotericism and Freemasonry; or rather there was in 1878 after the death of the Society's founder, Robert Wentworth Little. The S.R.I.A. derived from a pre-existing Scottish Society, which claimed descent from a still earlier English Society that apparently flourished in the 1850s and that demanded no masonic qualification for membership. In the early years of the S.R.I.A. Little, strove – fortunately without success – to make it an adjunct of a purely masonic Order, the Red Cross of Rome and Constantine. He had no great personal interest in occultism in general or Rosicrucianism in particular, any more than did his co-founder, W.J. Hughan, who was essentially an orthodox masonic historian with no great enthusiasm for esoteric pursuits although he did contribute papers on early Rosicrucian texts to the Society's journal, *The Rosicrucian*. Some early members, notably Kenneth Mackenzie and F.G. Irwin, did lean more towards occultism than to Freemasonry, but it was Little's successors in the office of Supreme Magus who brought about a real change.

They, in the persons of Dr. William Woodman and William Wynn Westcott, were dedicated occultists for whom esoteric pursuits were more important than masonic activities. Still, as its members will testify, the S.R.I.A. clearly owes much of its ritual structure to that of the masonic Ancient & Accepted Rite. In like manner, when Westcott and Woodman, aided and abetted by Samuel Liddell Mathers, also a prominent member of the S.R.I.A., founded the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1888 they accomplished a fusion of elements from Freemasonry with those from more strictly esoteric Orders and Societies.

The ceremonial structure, layout of the Temple and Regalia of the Golden Dawn draw heavily upon those of the masonic Royal Arch: for example, there are very close similarities between the robes, sceptres and positions in the Temple of the three Principals in a Royal Arch Chapter, and those of the Emperor, Praemonstrator and

Cancellarius of a Golden Dawn Temple. Those who are familiar with both bodies will also note the parallels between the banners and the central altar of each, and the close parallel between one of the signs used in the Golden Dawn and one encountered within the Holy Royal Arch [It would, however, be quite inappropriate for me to identify the sign to which I am referring]. But in terms of ethos and teachings the Golden Dawn was - and presumably still is - essentially esoteric. So did the fusion of two disparate types of institution work? In pragmatic terms, yes, it did - but not because there is any esoteric element in masonry, it worked simply because the structural elements, the psycho-dynamics, of initiatic rituals are basically the same wherever and whenever they are worked.

In any true ceremony of initiation most, if not all, of the following elements will be present:

- 1) The candidate will enter in darkness so that the unfolding ceremony brings him into light.
- 2) He (or she) will undergo a numerically significant symbolic journey involving tests and trials; the ritual use of musical sound (usually the unaccompanied human voice); and the stimulation of the senses of touch (perhaps with a symbolic weapon) and smell (incense).
- 3) He will give an Obligation to keep secret what he has learned and undergone and to accept the responsibilities of his new situation [he is, of course, unable to divulge the essence of his inner *experience* of the ceremony as that is, by its very nature, incommunicable to another]
- 4) He will be entrusted with secret knowledge (both practical in the form of signs of recognition; and theoretical as he begins the process of acquiring secret wisdom).
- 5) He will be welcomed into his new peer group in sacramental form (usually by sharing a sacred meal).

It will be immediately apparent to freemasons that the theoretical part of element (4) and the whole of element (5) are absent from masonic rituals of initiation, unless the purely social festive board is taken to represent a shared sacred meal - a parallel difficult to justify for those with experience of masonic dining.

What, then, can be deduced from this comparison of masonic and esoteric institutions, and quick gallop through their respective histories ? We must conclude, I maintain, that they are very different animals. There are indeed, clear parallels and elements possessed in common: but any organisation must have a hierarchy, if only for the sake of administration, while the working of ceremonies - irrespective of their function - requires an established structure and regalia to identify those taking part. Symbols that convey new or unfamiliar concepts to the candidate in non-verbal form are the common currency of all ceremonial, whatever the message that they are designed to convey. The differences between the two types of institution are, however, more pronounced.

In Freemasonry the ceremonies are designed to convey a series of simple moral precepts - nothing more and nothing less. There is no progressive unfolding of secret knowledge, nor a progressive revelation through experience of the rituals, and there is a metaphorical rather than an actual change of psycho-spiritual state within the candidate (that is not to deny the possibility that *some* initiates into Masonry may have experienced such a change; for the generality this is not so).

There are also other significant differences. Freemasonry is essentially an 'open' organisation: it does not hide the fact of its existence or require its members to conceal the fact of their membership; it openly declares its aims and objects; it makes no secret of the fact that it works ceremonies of initiation to inculcate and reinforce its moral message, and it simply keeps private the specific content of the ceremonies; it has no secret doctrines and its only 'secrets' are the signs of recognition used in the ceremonial context; it does not intrude upon or seek to change the belief systems or spiritual practices of its members. To most of its members Freemasonry is a social club with charitable aims that reinforces moral precepts with the aid of ritual. In short, it fulfils a different need and performs a completely different function from that of an esoteric movement.

Compared with Freemasonry esoteric movements are closed systems. Their doctrines, practices and membership are reserved from the outside world, and even their very existence may be kept secret. This secrecy is not for any dubious reason, but to keep private what cannot manifest except in an enclosed environment in which there can be

an effective psycho-spiritual interaction between the members of the Order or Society in question. There is also a progressive unfolding of secret knowledge, or gnosis, which is made meaningful by way of ritual experience and the discipline of private spiritual practice (*e.g.* prayer, meditation and spiritual exercises such as those laid down by St. Ignatius Loyola). In general terms esoteric movements are illuminating, revelatory and spiritually revolutionary, whereas Freemasonry is prosaic and representative of orthodoxy and the mores of the established social order.

The question remains, can they mix ?, are they compatible ? Speaking from personal experience, no, they are not. It would be invidious to identify the bodies concerned, but I can emphasise the lack of compatibility between masonic Orders and esoteric movements by the following examples. I have watched one masonic body attempt to engraft esoteric principles and practices on to its workings, with peculiarly disastrous results: the problem seems to be compounded by the ritual ineptitude of most of the officers, but for the candidate (who was not myself) the consequence was to nullify any psycho-spiritual effect that there might have been. Similarly the intrusion of bovine 'knife and fork' masons into a truly spiritual rite within Freemasonry is invariably an unmitigated disaster. I have watched with dismay the erosion of its true ethos within one masonic body that meets on the European mainland; it is chivalric in essence, and its purpose is to guide candidates towards their own spiritual regeneration, but when the numerical balance of members became weighted towards the 'knife and fork' tendency, regeneration slid towards degeneration and the rite in question - in this specific instance - has become a mere shell, devoid of meaning and empty of any spiritual presence. Its secret word should now be 'Ichabod' (*i.e.* 'The Glory has departed')

Perhaps Masonry has become too materialistic and Esoteric Movements have become too idealistic, but whatever the reasons, the two paths are essentially incompatible. One can walk down either on different occasions (I have been happily involved in many masonic bodies, and in equally as many esoteric movements; and with one exception I am happy to tell you - in private - what they are), but one cannot ride both of these horses at the same time. Eventually one path loses its attractions and the other beckons more enticingly: then it is time to decide which path to follow. As with Lazarus and Dives in the parable (you will know the story - the consequence of a rich

man being unable to pass through the gate of heaven just as his camel failed the needle's eye test) there is a great gulf fixed between the two, but which of them is epitomised by Lazarus and which by Dives, I cannot say. Or rather, diplomacy demands that I shall not.

At this point, on the few previous occasions when I have delivered this lecture, all of them to 'open' but interested audiences, I have drawn it to a close. Much of what I have said is subjective opinion, although I do believe that most objective observers of these two types of ceremonial path would agree with my conclusions, but in a specifically masonic environment, even making due allowance for subjectivity, there are questions that remain.

You may wonder, for example, how a desire to participate in any of the various extant esoteric societies and Orders, squares with a wish to remain true to the ethos of Masonry and to its cardinal principles. Equally you may be concerned that Grand Lodge may actively disapprove of the involvement of freemasons in esoteric bodies and that such activities – assuming that you undertake them – will be damaging to your masonic career, or you may suspect that an association of Freemasonry with any given esoteric movement will increase the suspicion and hostility of the Churches and of other religious bodies towards us. On these and other questions I have my own views, but it is far more interesting for me to know what are *your* questions, *your* feelings, *your* opinions and *your* conclusions. So here I would like to thank you for your indulgence in listening to me, and I really will come to an end.