

PONDERING FREEMASONRY

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The Victorian Lodge of Research No 218

Sequendo Lampada Disco

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VICTORIAN LODGE OF RESEARCH No 218
volume 23

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Worshipful Brother Jean-Michel David, PM.

The Secretary being Wor. Bro. Alan Jennings, PJGD

Front Cover: English fob Masonic 'ball', circa 1910

Back Cover: Wor. Bro. J-M. David, W. M. for 2009.

CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Correspondence Circle Report	5
Correspondence Circle Local Secretaries	6
Editorial Policy	9
Lodge Details & Membership	11
Chapter I	In Search of a Deeper Meaning 13 <i>Wor. Bro. Paul Alexander, PGStdB, 218 IPM</i>
Chapter II	A Study of Comparative Ritualism 29 <i>V.Wor. Bro. Graeme Love, KL, PGIW</i>
Chapter III	The Masonic Marianne 47 <i>Wor. Bro. Philip Carter, PM (NSW)</i>
Chapter IV	Order out of Chaos 71 <i>W.Bro. N.D. Peterson, 33, FPS (USA)</i>
Chapter V	The Spirit of Secularism in Freemasonry . . . 95 <i>Wor. Bro. J-M. David, PM, 218 W.M.</i>
Miscellanea	A – Report: 2nd ICHF, Edinburgh 125 <i>Wor.Bro.V.Rev. Frederick A. Shade PjGD</i>
	B – Review: Cooper’s <i>KTs in Scotland</i> 137 <i>Wor.Bro.V.Rev. Frederick A. Shade PjGD</i>
Appendices	I – Masters of the Lodge of Research 151
	II – Officers of the Lodge, 2009 152
	III – Members of the Lodge 153
	IV – Members of the Correspondence Circle . . . 155
	V – Syllabus for 2009 and for 2010 159
Cumulative Index	161
Privileges of Membership	175
Correspondence Circle Membership Form	177

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SPIRIT OF SECULARISM IN FREEMASONRY

delivered in Lodge by

Wor. Bro. Jean-Michel David, 218 W.M.

On Friday, 25th September 2009

I do not normally like to characterise nor ‘define’ terms I am using – unless they are strange, half-forgotten, or used in an unusual manner – though in this case I shall make an exception, and that for a simple reason: it is often assumed that secularism stands in opposition or contradiction to faith or religion. Though the manner in which the term finds expression of course *may* set it in such an opposition, it does not, in and of itself, demand to do so.

Perhaps I can do no better than by first quoting the current Pope, Benedict the XVI, who is reported to have said on the 12th September 2008 on a visit to France that it ‘seemed to me [ie, the Pope] that secularism in itself is not in contradiction with faith’¹.

So what is secularism?

It’s one of those strange words that, like ‘game’ or ‘religion’, appears to be more easily defined or characterised more by what it is *not*, or contrasted to other concepts that have elements that are in some manner considered opposit, than by

¹ – *International Herald Tribune*, www.iht.com/articles/2008/09/12/europe/13pope.php

simply and clearly considering it on its own. In that sense, ‘secular’ is often *contrasted* to ‘religious’. Yet we should be careful here: a *contrast* is not an *opposition* – an error all too often made. If we consider, to assist in clarification, three terms that can each be considered in opposition to ‘religious’, each with different connotations, ‘irreligious’, ‘anti-religious’ and ‘non-religious’, though they each have etymological connections in that each uses a negation prefix (‘ir-’, ‘anti-’, and ‘non-’), each nonetheless has clearly distinct connotations.

I shall not here dwell much on those three terms, save in considering these for the purposes of clarifying the concept of ‘secular’. The first of those three terms, ‘irreligious’, apart from its inclusion in Anderson’s Constitution in the form of ‘irreligious libertine’ (and to which we shall return a little later), seems to refer to the individual as individual. For example, the ‘irreligious’ seems to characterise *someone* who’s personal way of being, or his or her psychological state, appears to lack a sense of wonder, of awe, of reverence, and of majesty towards the transcendent. This I would personally *contrast* to the second term ‘anti-religious’, which appears to connote something more akin to explaining the religious as merely delusional dispositions of individuals; or along socio-political considerations such as, but not only, the views of Marx; or against establishments – these usually, but not always, as structured church hierarchy – manifesting in religions. As an example, the ‘anti-clerical’ political situation in France following its late 18th century revolution is probably a good as any to bring this aspect to carity.

In contrast to those two, the third of these, viz. ‘non-religious’ has a close rapport to ‘secular’. Science, as an example, is non-religious. As is, I will venture to add at this juncture, Freemasonry.

The problem arises when no differentiation is made between those three terms that negatively prefix 'religious'. To be sure, an individual may be all of those at once, and at times vocal individuals who have a dominant inclination to the non-religious, such as Dawkins, happen to also perhaps be irreligious and also certainly anti-religious². It is perhaps this confusion that sees certain religious fundamentalists concerned with all three as-though-the-same when confronting the secular.

Yet the secular, in and of itself, is neither irreligious nor anti-religious. Rather, its concerns lie *outside* what is the religious life... with some qualifications. So let's also all too briefly concern ourselves with these solely to add clarity, rather than to begin to deeply investigate. When, for example, investigations arise as to what occurs within the human brain during periods of worship or prayer, and how these contrast to a control group, the *secular non-religious* scientific investigation may be seem to delve into an aspect of the religious. Yet I think we can all see the distinction between such an investigation undertaken by, for example, those who on the one hand may investigate such for its own sake; and those, on the other hand, on either side of a spectrum that seek to either 'debunk' or to 'prove' the efficacy of the religious experience.

The secular, then, *includes*, but is also more encompassing, than the scientific. It includes the scientific, as science-qua-science is, in its essence, non-religious. This does not mean that individuals involved in the scientific endeavour are not motivated by religious considerations nor that, as individuals, they cannot be deeply religious. Indeed, from Aristotle to Newton (and beyond) the religious element played its part in their own respective lives and world-views. Yet just as Coper-

2 - Cf, for example, his *The God Delusion*, 2006

nicus, Galileo or Kepler may have had deeply held religious convictions, these can be considered independently of the investigative impulse at work, in their careful investigation, and in the formulation of their scientific judgements. *Independent*, though not necessarily in *opposition*, for of course their peculiar religious views was, for them, a motivating force in the manner in which they pursued their scientific endeavours.

The secular, of course, involves more, as mentioned earlier, than the scientific. For many of us, the vast range of activities with which we engage are divested of their possible religious infusion. For example, in the South (or 'Festive Board'), or at home with one's family, or indeed with friends at a restaurant, the sharing of a meal is not usually taken as a religious expression. This need not mean that some people do not transform all daily acts into religious sacraments and, indeed and as an example, the Christian mystical tradition includes a practice of continuously 'breathing' the Jesus prayer with one's heart until it prays itself, thereby transforming every single moment into an act of worship. Similarly, the Jewish *Shabbat* meal (at the very least, but also other meals) transforms the otherwise 'everyday' evening meal into an act of worship. And again, one of the Buddhist practices of presence-of-mind with the ingestion of each morsel of food transforms the act into meditative religious practice.

These, however, show that each and every act may be transformed to religious act, not that they are, in and of themselves, religious. For most of us, I would be surprised if these everyday activities were sacramental. This does not of course preclude our thanks and appreciation for the bounties to which we have access and in which we partake.

I mention these examples to also show that acts may *become*, for some amongst us, religious in nature. This is in fact

a statement that bears far more significance than is at first apparent: that we may decide to imbue the world with religious significance is an option that is very modern. For our forebears of even a few centuries ago, and in some regions of the world still, this was, or is, not an option. Rather, the social realm is such that the world is deemed to be as described from the religious perspective of the region under consideration. In contrast, we in the 'West' (but of course not solely in the modern West) consider such to be one of the options open to each one of us and, in diametric contrast to former world views, the *religious* view will be judged according to something along the lines as to whether such improves or diminishes *human* endeavour. This is something to which I shall return as we consider some aspects of Freemasonry.

Nonetheless, it would be curious if all that was meant by 'secular' was that which was not religious in nature. Rather, there is something else at play that reflects a *disposition* that *contrasts* to the religious impulse – remembering that a 'contrast' is not equivalent to an 'opposition to'. That which characterises the secular impulse is, I would suggest, Humanism. In that sense, it is more than simply a description of, for example, a daily activity such as the partaking of a meal for its own sake, but rather that in the meal-taking, an impulse of (amongst other possibilities such as the purely biological need to diminish hunger) either a *religious* or a *humanist* motif may infuse the act.

The humanism I am referring to has its infancy that antedates modern Freemasonry by a few centuries, yet incorporates within it that which leads towards a state that can in fact permit the development of Freemasonry as a consequence of its (ie, humanism's) own emergence. In its historical sense, humanism is a movement within which the likes of

Campanella, Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch find themselves. It is principally characterised by a reaction against the Scholasticism of the time, and searches for meaning and learning from antiquity or, as rather phrased in the context of Freemasonry, from ‘time immemorial’.

In its development, what humanism has permitted is a slow shift in our valuing or imbuing meaning from a world view that presupposes a universe *permeated* with spiritual beings and their effects, to a world that gets progressively replaced with a sense of meaning based on the *impervious* human being.

It is in such space that the development of science *circa* the foundation of the Royal Society (and its equivalents elsewhere), and in the progressive diminishment of any reference to God and other spiritual beings as necessary explanatory force, that modern Freemasonry establishes itself.

Certainly the early 18th century was still permeated by a view of the world that was what we would now describe as ‘magical’ and, in some ways, ‘naïve’, but what is also interesting is that the formation of the premier Grand Lodge – often called the ‘Moderns’ – included amongst its members both claimed atheists³ (albeit ‘intelligent’ ones) and deists... Now, in mentioning ‘deism’ we have another concept that allows the humanist position to develop, and hence something that is again influential in the development of the spirit of secularism.

The key characteristic of deism is that it is in essence rationalistic and anti-theistic. Note that I use the term ‘anti-theistic’ rather than ‘atheistic’. Anti-theistic, because as the

3 – for example, Deputy Grand Master Martin Folkes Cf Alain Bernheim’s *Une certaine idée de la Franc-Maçonnerie*, referencing Knoop & Jones *AQC* 56 (1945) and Gould *AQC* 6 (1893)

theism of the times included within it a world-view that can be characterised as anti-rational, so the *deism* of the period can be considered as a rational and naturalistic response within a worldview that was still, fundamentally or at least superficially, very Christian⁴. Another characteristic of deism is that though it was not restricted to England, its chief manifestation was not only in the *region* which saw the emergence of the Premier Modern Grand Lodge, but also of the *period*: *viz*, late 17th century England, especially London. Of course, deism was influential also in the establishment of the Royal Society as well as in the writings of various empiricists. Perhaps, in our modern world, it is difficult to understand that much of the flavour of the deists was also anti-clerical – to say the least. In some cases Deism was the closest one could get to explicit atheism without incurring the long arm of the law (which considered atheism a crime against both God and against the realm of the land). We are possibly blinded by the inclusion of the Greek root word for ‘God’ in ‘Deism’, yet it is a concept that is far removed from the more theistic understanding of the various Christian denominations.

To gain a brief sense of this, consider the following – and I shall refer only to the English Deists of the period, omitting whether some of these also happen to be Accepted Freemasons in a Modern’s Lodge, and also omitting similar considerations occurring, for example, in France and Germany. The point here is more that these were key Deists of the time, and were both influential and influenced by other Deists, remembering that Deism was itself influential within early Modern’s Lodges.

Let’s briefly consider a couple of handful of such authors⁵:

4 – of course, I am speaking here of western Europe.

5 – this list and the indented description is extracted and slightly modified from vol. IV the 1908 *Catholic Encyclopedia* under the heading

Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1581-1633)

is perhaps considered the most learned of the deists and at the same time the least disposed to submit Christian revelation to a destructive criticism. He was the founder of a rationalistic form of religion – the religion of nature – which consisted of no more than the residuum of truth common to all forms of positive religion when their distinctive characteristics were left aside.

Charles Blount (1654-93)

Blount was noted as a critic of both the Old and New Testaments. His methods of attack upon the Christian position were characterized by an indirectness and a certain duplicity that has ever since come to be in some degree associated with the whole deistical movement. The notes that he appended to his translation of Apollonius are calculated to weaken or destroy credence in the miracles of Christ, for some of which he actually suggests explanations upon natural grounds, thus arguing against the trustworthiness of the New Testament. In a similar manner, by employing the argument of Hobbes against the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, and by attacking the miraculous events therein recorded, he had impeached the accuracy and veracity of the Old Testament. He rejects utterly the doctrine of a mediatorial Christ and contends that such a doctrine is subversive of true religion; while the many falsehoods he perceives in the traditional and positive forms of Christianity he puts down to the political invention of priests and religious teachers. Blount proposes seven articles, basically an expansion of Lord Herbert's five. His notes to the translation of Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius Tyanæus* were published in 1680. He wrote also the *Anima Mundi* (1678-9); *Religio Laïci*, practically a translation of Lord

'Deism'. I quote these at length for the point made to be really considered with all its consequential force-of-impact.

Herbert's book of the same title (1683); and *The Oracles of Reason* (1893).

John Toland (1670-1722)

Toland, while originally a believer in Divine revelation and not opposed to the doctrines of Christianity, advanced to the rationalistic position with strong pantheistic tendencies by taking away the supernatural element from religion. His principal thesis consisted in the argument that 'there is nothing in the Gospels contrary to reason, nor above it; and that no Christian doctrine can properly be called a mystery'. This statement he made on the assumption that whatever is contrary to reason is untrue, and whatever is above reason is inconceivable. He contended, therefore, that reason is the safe and only guide to truth, and that the Christian religion lays no claim to being mysterious. Toland also raised questions as to the Canon of Scripture and the origins of the Church. He adopted the view that in the Early Church there were two opposing factions, the liberal and the Judaising; and he compared some eighty spurious writings with the New Testament Scriptures, in order to cast doubt upon the authenticity and reliability of the canon. His *Amyntor* evoked a reply from the celebrated Dr. Clarke, and a considerable number of books and tracts were published in refutation of his doctrine. The chief works for which he was responsible are *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696); *Letters to Serena* (1704); *Pantheisticon* (1720); *Amyntor* (1699); *Nazarenus* (1718).

Antony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713)

The Earl of Shaftesbury, one of the most popular, elegant, and ornate of these writers, is generally classed among the deists on account of his *Characteristics*. The *Characteristics of Men, Matters, Opinions, and Times* (1711-1723) gives clear evidence of Shaftesbury's deistical ten-

dencies. It contains frequent criticisms of Christian doctrines, the Scriptures, and revelation. He contends that this last is not only useless but positively mischievous, on account of its doctrine of rewards and punishments. The virtue of morality he makes to consist in a conformity of our affections to our natural sense of the sublime and beautiful, to our *natural* estimate of the *worth of men* and things. The Gospel, he asserts with Blount, was only the fruit of a scheme on the part of the clergy to secure their own aggrandizement and enhance their power. Shaftesbury's more important contributions to this literature are the *Characteristics* and the *Several Letters Written by a Noble Lord to a Young Man in the University* (1716).

Antony Collins (1676-1729)

Collins caused a considerable stir by the publication (1713) of his *Discourse of Freethinking, occasioned by the Rise and Growth of a Sect call'd Freethinkers*. He had previously conducted an argument against the immateriality and immortality of the soul and against human liberty. In this he had been answered by Dr. Samuel Clarke. The *Discourse* advocated unprejudiced and unfettered enquiry, asserted the right of human reason to examine and interpret revelation, and attempted to show the uncertainty of prophecy and of the New Testament record. In another work Collins puts forth an argument to prove the Christian religion false, though he does not expressly draw the conclusion indicated. He asserts that Christianity is dependent upon Judaism, and that its proof is the fulfilment of the prophetic utterances contained in the Old Testament. He then proceeds to point out that all such Prophetic utterance is allegorical in nature and cannot be considered to furnish a real proof of the truth of its event. He further points out that the idea of the Messiah among the Jews was of recent growth before the time of Christ, and that the Hebrews may have derived

many of their theological ideas from their contact with other peoples, such as the Egyptians and Chaldeans. In particular, when his writings on prophecy were attacked he did his utmost to discredit the book of Daniel. Altogether Collins' attacks upon prophecy were considered to be of so serious a nature that they called forth no less than *thirty-five* replies. Of his works, the following may be noticed, as bearing especially upon the subject of deism: *Essay Concerning the Use of Reason in Theology* (1707); *Discourse of Freethinking* (1713); *Discourse on the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1724); *The Scheme of Literal Prophecy Considered* (1727).

Thomas Woolston (1669-1733)

Woolston appeared as a moderator in the acrimonious controversy that was being waged between Collins and his critics with his *Moderator between an Infidel and an Apostate*. As Collins had succeeded in allegorizing the prophecies of the Old Testament until nothing remained of them, so Woolston tried to allegorize away the miracles of Christ. During the years 1728-9, six discourses on the supposed miracles in the New Testament came out in three parts, in which Woolston asserted, with what was considered 'an extraordinary violence of language and blasphemy that could only be attributed to a madman', that the miracles of Christ, when taken in a literal and historical sense, are false, absurd, and fictitious. They must therefore, he urges, be received in a mystical and allegorical sense. In particular, he argued at great length against the miracles of resurrection from the dead wrought by Christ, and against the resurrection of Christ himself. The Bishop of London issued five pastoral letters against him, and many ecclesiastics wrote in refutation of his work. In 1729-30, Woolston published *A Defense of his Discourse against the Bishops of London and St. David's*.

Matthew Tindal (1657-1733)

Tindal gave to the controversy the work that soon became known as the 'Deists' Bible'. His *Christianity as Old as the Creation* was published late in life in 1730. As its sub-title indicates, its aim was to show that the Gospel is no more than a republication of the Law of Nature. This it undertakes to make plain by eviscerating the Christian religion of all that is not a mere statement of natural religion. External revelation is declared to be needless and useless, indeed impossible, and both the Old and New Testaments to be full of oppositions and contradictions. The work was taken as a serious attack upon the traditional position of Christianity in England, as is evinced by the hostile criticism it at once provoked. The Bishop of London issued a pastoral; Waterland, Law, Conybeare, and others replied to it, Conybeare's *Defence* creating a considerable stir at the time. More than any other work, *Christianity as Old as the Creation* was the occasion of the writing of Butler's well known *Analogy*.

Thomas Morgan (d. 1743)

Morgan makes professions of Christianity, the usefulness of revelation, etc., but criticizes and at the same time rejects as revelational the Old Testament history, both as to its personages and its narratives of fact. He advances the theory that the Jews 'accomodated' the truth, and even goes so far as to extend this 'accomodation' to the Apostles and to Christ as well. His account of the origin of the Church is similar to that of Toland, in that he holds the two elements, Judaising and liberal, to have resulted in a fusion. His principal work is *The Moral Philosopher, a Dialogue between Philalethes, a Christian Deist, and Theophanes, a Christian Jew* (1737, 1739, 1740). This was answered by Dr. Chapman, whose reply called forth a defense on the part of Morgan in *The Moral Philosopher, or a farther Vindication of Moral Truth and Reason*.

Thomas Chubb (1679-1746)

Chubb (which the Encyclopedia further describes as 'a man of humble origin and of poor and elementary education, by trade a glove-maker and tallow-chandler, is the most plebeian representative of deism'). In 1731 he published *A Discourse Concerning Reason* in which he disavows his intention of opposing revelation or serving the cause of infidelity. But *The True Gospel of Jesus Christ*, in which Lechler sees 'an essential moment in the historical development of Deism', announces Christianity as a life rather than as a collection of doctrinal truths. The true gospel is that of natural religion, and as such Chubb treats it in his work. In his posthumous works a sceptical advance is made. These were published in 1748, and after the 'Remarks on the Scriptures' contain the author's 'Farewel to His Readers'. This 'Farewel' embraces a number of tracts on various religious subjects. A marked tendency to scepticism regarding providence pervades them. The efficacy of prayer, as well as the future (eschatological) state, is called in question. Arguments are urged against prophecy and miracle. There are fifty pages devoted to those against the Resurrection alone. Finally, Christ is presented as a mere man, who founded a religious sect among the Jews. He is also responsible for the sentiments of *The Case of Deism Fairly Stated*, an anonymous tract which he revised.

Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke (1678-1751)

Viscount Bolingbroke belongs to the deists chiefly by reason of his posthumous works, containing arguments against the truth and value of Scriptural history, and asserting that Christianity is a system footed upon the unlettered by the cunning of the clergy to further their own ends.

Peter Annet (1693-1769)

Annet was the author, among other works, of *Judging for Ourselves, or Freethinking the great Duty of Religion* (1739), *The Resurrection of Jesus Considered* (1744), *Supernatural Examined* (1747), and nine numbers of the *Free Inquirer* (1761). In the second of these works he denies the resurrection of Christ and accuses the Bible of fraud and imposture.

Henry Dodged (d. 1748)

Dodged, who wrote *Christianity not Founded on Argument*, is also generally reckoned, with Annet, as among the representative deists.

These are, then, the *English* deists who have put pen-to-paper and elicited numerous written responses. The thoughts these people manifested must have inevitably also been held by many others, and *discussions* amongst the educated must have been rather robust. It should perhaps also be remembered that at that time the term ‘agnostic’ was yet to be coined, and that only over a century *later*, by Huxley, and first published in 1869. I suspect that should the option have been genuinely available to them, instead of ‘Freethinker’ or ‘Deist’, many would have opted for the honesty of ‘atheist’ or ‘agnostic’.

A secular space, free of religious fervour, was therefore in the air from the beginnings of modern Freemasonry and, I would further suggest, that this space was created within such enclaves for the very purpose of freedom *from* religion. Even if remnants of religiosity were maintained within the ritual, this was still, it should be remembered, within a cultural framework that was in its bare infancy in terms of it being

socially acceptable that people could in fact *choose* their religious orientation, and not quite at the stage, except within quite limited circles, where a humanist option was feasible. Also, as should now be obvious from the Deists already mentioned, the content of rituals that harkened to the Bible had the possibility of being so allegorically ‘altered’ in understanding as to make theists of the period at the very least suspicious of the understanding promulgated within Lodges who had self-claimed deists amongst their ranks. It is therefore no wonder, for example, that Pope Clement XII issued a Bull against Freemasonry in 1738⁶, in which Freemasonic activity is to be considered ‘as being most suspect of heresy’.

It can be construed, therefore, that Modern Freemasonry did not begin as Christian, but rather in a social environment that is Christian, and that thus inevitably takes on some of its unquestioned characteristics, but in such a manner as to allow and, indeed, *encourage*, a radical re-definition of the passages ritualistically adopted and also, it should be remembered, explicitly claimed within Masonic literature to be allegorically understood.

Modern Freemasonry can thus, I shall therefore already claim at this stage, be seen to arise out of the developing spirit of secularism. Of course it has recourse to the masons guild’s former mystery plays, working tools, and Biblical reference, but these are interpreted as symbolic and allegorical, never literally. This does not prevent later interpreters, or indeed those who were even then motivated far more from the religious impulse, to present their interpretation of the symbols, tools and stories in more theological ways. This happened then – especially with the self-claimed Antients (and, I would suggest, *rightfully* self-claimed, in that the worldview

6 – *In Eminenti*.

they embodied was more ancient than the developing Freemasonry of the Moderns) – as it does today.

If the early development of this phase of Freemasonry can be reconsidered in this light, it accounts for the rather radically different development that arises especially in (pre-revolutionary) France: on the whole, Freemasonry there, taking its cue from the Moderns, does not have a concomitant development and opposition from an equivalent to the Antients. In England, the Antients' more theological view of things come to somewhat mask the rather radical foundation of the Moderns, yet the same spirit of secularism that nurtured the infancy of Modern Freemasonry continues to be at play even within the United Grand Lodge of England.

The difference, for *us*, is that we live in a world that is *de-facto* secular, whereas our brethren who lived at the time of the formation of the first Grand Lodge of London were immersed in a world that was *de-facto* theologically viewed.

Antony Collins, the Deist earlier mentioned, it may be recalled, published in 1713 his *Discourse of Freethinking, occasioned by the Rise and Growth of a Sect call'd Freethinkers*. If we carefully look through that and other such publications, what is evident is that it is a similar impulse at work that earlier manifested as with the Humanist movement in northern Renaissance Italy, and later became, especially in the Francophonic and Anglo-Saxon world, overt secularism. 'Freethinking' was even a term that was later adopted by various secularists. It should also perhaps be mentioned that it was only in the second half of the 19th century that 'secular education' was understood as even being possible in England, and not, in itself, in *opposition* to religious education. Prior to that, it was generally assumed that education *had* to be permeated by whatever dominant religious view was of the period and region – and of

course some amongst us may still consider an aspect of this to be correct.

Discussions and characterisations of secularism have variously been published and discussed in pamphlets, articles and books. As characteristic of these, let's take a look at a couple of pages from Holyoake's (late) 1871 *Principles of Secularism Illustrated*, for therein, I would suggest, is reflected (by then in clarified details) the impulse that was earlier at work in the works of the Deists, rationalists, and humanists but also, importantly, draws directly from the 'Free-Thinkers' already mentioned:



PRINCIPLES OF SECULARISM DEFINED.

CHAPTER III.

I.

SECULARISM is the study of promoting human welfare by material means; measuring human welfare by the utilitarian rule, and making the service of others a duty of life. Secularism relates to the present existence of man, and to action, the issues of which can be tested by the experience of this life—having for its objects the development of the physical, moral, and intellectual nature of man to the highest perceivable point, as the immediate duty of society: inculcating the practical sufficiency of natural morality apart from Atheism, Theism, or Christianity; engaging its adherents in the promotion of human improvement by material means, and making these agreements the ground of common unity for all who would regulate life by reason and ennoble it by service. The Secular is sacred in its influence on life, for by purity of material conditions the loftiest natures are best sustained, and the lower the most surely elevated. Secularism is a series of principles intended for the guidance of those who find Theology indefinite, or inadequate, or deem it unreliable. It replaces theology, which mainly regards life as a sinful necessity, as a scene of tribulation through which we pass to a better world. Secularism rejoices in this life, and regards it as the sphere of those duties which educate men to fitness for any future and better life, should such transpire.

II.

A Secularist guides himself by maxims of Positivism, seeking to discern what *is* in Nature—what *ought* to be in morals—selecting the *affirmative* in exposition, concerning himself with the real, the right, and the constructive. Positive principles are principles which are provable. “A positive

precept," says Bishop Butler, "is a precept the reason of which we see." Positivism is policy of material progress.

III.

Science is the available Providence of life. The problem to be solved by a science of Society, is to find that situation in which it shall be impossible for a man to be depraved or poor. Mankind are saved by being served. Spiritual sympathy is a lesser mercy than that forethought which anticipates and extirpates the causes of suffering. Deliverance from sorrow or injustice is before consolation—doing well is higher than meaning well—work is worship to those who accept Theism, and duty to those who do not.

IV.

Sincerity, though not errorless, involves the least chance of error, and is without moral guilt. Sincerity is well-informed, conscientious conviction, arrived at by intelligent examination, animating those who possess that conviction to carry it into practice from a sense of duty. Virtue in relation to opinion consists neither in conformity nor non-conformity, but in sincere beliefs, and in living up to them.

V.

Conscience is higher than Consequence.*

VI.

All pursuit of good objects with pure intent is religiousness in the best sense in which this term appears to be used. A "good object" is an object consistent with truth, honour, justice, love. A pure "intent" is the intent of serving humanity. Immediate service of humanity is not intended to mean instant gratification, but "immediate" in contradistinction to the interest of another life. The distinctive peculiarity of the Secularist is, that he seeks that good which is dictated by Nature, which is attainable by material means, and which is of immediate service to humanity—a religiousness to which the idea of God is not essential, nor the denial of the idea necessary.

* Vide Mr. Holdreth's Papers.

VII.

Nearly all inferior natures are susceptible of moral and physical improvability; this improvability can be indefinitely secured by supplying proper material conditions; these conditions may one day be supplied by a system of wise and fraternal co-operation, which primarily entrenches itself in common prudence, which enacts service according to industrial capacity, and distributes wealth according to rational needs. Secular principles involve for mankind a future, where there shall exist unity of condition with infinite diversity of intellect, where the subsistence of ignorance and selfishness shall leave men equal, and universal purity enable all things—noble society, the treasures of art, and the riches of the world—to be had in common.

VIII.

Since it is not capable of demonstration whether the inequalities of human condition will be compensated for in another life—it is the business of intelligence to rectify them in this world. The speculative worship of superior beings, who cannot need it, seems a lesser duty than the patient service of known *inferior* natures, and the mitigation of harsh destiny, so that the ignorant may be enlightened and the low elevated.



I'm not sure about others, but I cannot but see that the principles therein enumerated positively reflect the principles claimed for Freemasonry: we are encouraged to study the seven liberal arts and sciences; to develop moral discernment and ascertain the morals in situations; to better the lot of humanity; and to leave religion out of it all when coming together as Freemasons.

I have even sometimes wondered if the choice of 'Free-Masons', in earlier times always hyphenated, is perhaps not a conscious choice reflecting what Deists and Rationalists saw as Free-Thinkers (earlier encountered in some of the key Deist works).

If what I have tried to encompass above proves correct, then this has deeper ramifications for not only our understanding of Freemasonry, but also for its further development and for understanding its current diminishment in the world at large.

Let's take the last point first.

Current membership is virtually in free-fall especially in Anglo-Saxon countries which includes the UK, the USA, Canada, and Australia. Admittedly, there are pockets of periodical growth here and there, but these do not appear to be truly sustained but rather reflect periodic public interest as reflected in, often, popular culture (whether as the result of a very localised temporary growth, or a film, book, or other public media attention). These countries also happen to be amongst the most secular in the world, yet have a Freemasonry that has become, over the years, increasingly *removed* from its secular roots. In continental Europe, and in Italy, France and Germany in particular, though they share with the Anglo-Saxon countries societies that are at root secular, the diversity in the available Freemasonry includes ongoing and

strong *secular* options. There, the decline in Freemasonry is either non-existent or, compared to our situation, relatively minimal.

The question that can be asked is what does Freemasonry offer to its members? In former times, it provided a venue whereby positive value and enrichment was derived from participating in questions that would not be easily addressed outside of Universities – and even then in only some Universities, for many (including Cambridge and Oxford) were steeped in religious underpinnings! For the deist, for the humanist, for the secularist (the last of which may also be deeply religious), Freemasonry was a near-unique opportunity for deepening meaning, for human flourishing with *secular* experiences that nonetheless bring *fullness* or plenitude. Does this still occur in modern Freemasonry? I would suggest that it can and only partially does. Partially, as its myths and allegories are no longer from a source that is taken for granted by society in general, but rather those that somehow already pre-suppose a familiarity with the Judeo-Christian view that, whether we like it or not, we cannot any longer assume to be generally known to potential candidates. This is a situation that would not have been the case even a century ago, not to speak of the educated class in 1717!

Further, whereas in former times it helped to Free the mind by considering the Biblical references in allegorical ways, these days it begins to have the opposite effect: it assumes that the candidate become familiar with a limited version of the story, and then re-interpret it in manner contrary to its apparent saga. I would suggest that though it is fine to allegorically and symbolically make sense of items and stories with which we are familiar, it is, conversely, asking a lot to firstly ask that the candidate become familiar with a former

worldview and then allegorically re-interpret the same. So what we are left with is vastly fewer genuine potential candidates – except perhaps in the USA which has the largest proportion of active church-goers in the Western world – but even there, the spectre of secularism in everyday society makes allegorical interpretation either ‘obvious’ or, with some fundamentalists, anathema.

One of the consequences is therefore a careful look at the story upon which Freemasonry is founded. Certainly ongoing reference to King Solomon’s Temple and its Biblical reference is apt, yet much of the manner in which such is presented is far more removed from the modern worldview (which tends to secularism) than it would have been for those living in former times.

In earlier Christian times, the Temple at Jerusalem was considered as built for God. Yet here even the Biblical reference could be better allegorised by more literalness, for it was constructed not for God, but rather for his Name, and in a manner that sought to reflect Beauty, Harmony, Elegance, Truth, and Craftmanship. The focus becomes a little different under these considerations, and certainly appear more in line with modern contemporary (ie, post-19th century!) societal temperament.

Curiously, it is also virtually anathema to request of someone the advocacy of a specific belief. In the days of the early 18th century, to ask of someone that they believe in a Supreme Being was tantamount to saying ‘believe what you will’ – with some qualifications, such as not being a ‘person of loose morals’ (‘irreligious libertine’), nor someone who claims to be able to prove that which cannot be proven (‘stupid atheist’). Yet even the request that they believe in a Supreme Being is *NOT*, and never was, a requirement in Anderson’s

Constitutions! In fact, given the world-view of the times, the statement included thereon could be considered provocatively secular. I realise that many brethren have previously read the section on many occasions, but it is worth re-iterating here⁷:

I. *Concerning* GOD *and* RELIGION.

A *Mason* is oblig'd by his Tenure, to obey the moral Law ; and if he rightly understands the Art, he will never be a stupid *Atheist*, nor an irreligious *Libertine*. But though in ancient Times Masons were charg'd in every Country to be of the Religion of that Country or Nation, whatever it was, yet 'tis now thought more expedient only to oblige them to that Religion in which all Men agree, leaving their particular Opinions to themselves ; that is, to be *good Men and true*, or Men of Honour and Honesty, by whatever Denominations or Persuasions they may be distinguish'd ; whereby Masonry becomes the *Center of Union*, and the Means of conciliating true Friendship among Persons that must else have remain'd at a perpetual Distance.

That second sentence, which forms the bulk of the paragraph, is well worth re-reading and pondering more than once, and certainly not merely casually. In a nutshell, it claims that in the past a mason had to be of the religion of the nation (remembering that we are here dealing with one of the few countries that has its head-of-state simultaneously head of a nationalised church!), but that even that 'is now thought more expedient' for them to be 'good and true', of 'honour and honesty'.

7 - 1723 or first edition of Anderson's *Constitutions of the Free-Masons*

Even the later equivalent 'Constitutions' of the Antients, the *Abiman Rezon*, has this section instructively similar with, however, reflecting differences previously mentioned towards the non-secular. It states:

**THE OLD CHARGES OF THE FREE AND
ACCEPTED MASONS.**

CHARGE I.—CONCERNING GOD AND RELIGION.

A MASON is obliged, by his Tenure, to observe the moral Law as a true NOACHIDA *; and if he rightly understands the Craft, he will never be a stupid Atheist, nor an irreligious Libertine, nor act against Conscience.

In ancient Times the Christian Masons were charged to comply with the Christian Usages of each Country where they travelled or worked; being found in all Nations, even of divers Religions.

They are generally charged to adhere to that Religion in which all Men agree, (leaving each Brother to his own particular Opinion;) that is, to be good Men and true, Men of Honour and Honesty, by whatever Names, Religions, or Persuasions they may be distinguished; for they all agree in the three great Articles of Noah, enough to preserve the Cement of the Lodge.

Thus Masonry is the Centre of their Union, and the happy Means of conciliating Persons that otherwise must have remained at a perpetual Distance.

* Sons of Noah, the first Name of Free-masons.

It is evident that the Antients's later document includes language that seems far more reflective of the times and, to be sure, harkening to former documents of operative Ma-

sonry⁸. Yet we are dealing not with the pre-genesis of Modern Freemasonry but rather with the climate and conditions that sees Masonry transformed to Free-Masonry. We would do well, I suggest, to return to the wisdom exemplified in Anderson's words, our earliest document of Modern Freemasonry. The implications of this are manifold, for it would mean that one's belief remains, as in modern secular society, one's own prerogative, and that belief in a 'Supreme Being' is relegated to a person's private concerns, rather than being considered a precondition for initiation. Does this mean that any Grand Lodge taking this stand would no longer be in 'communion' with other Grand Lodges that have not? perhaps, though not necessarily and, in any case, such a decision would have to be made because first and foremost it is called forth by the very essence of Freemasonry – and I say this despite, or perhaps because of, my own firm faith in matters spiritual grounded in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

What I am suggesting above is certainly at odds with the current view of both our Grand Lodge [UGLV] and those Grand Lodges with which we are in amity, yet, it is one of those developments in history that sets most current forms of Freemasonry as reflecting former (and rather out-of-date) socio-political conditions across jurisdictions rather than reflecting Freemasonry *per-se*. In fact, it seems that the 'rules' or 'general guidelines of mutual recognition', initially formulated out of a request by the then Grand Master of UGLE for *formal* guidelines to then be adopted by his own GL (*circa* 1929), have come to be of greater importance than considerations of

8 – though I did not mention it in the spoken text, references here to the Antients' implicit connection with the GLs of Scotland and of Ireland, and the religious views there, are also worthy of consideration. What is also really worthy of note is the explicit mention of the Articles of Noah - therein mentioned as three, though more generally considered as seven.

the *impulse* or *essense* of Freemasonry and, furthermore, these seemingly mistaken for claimed landmarks.

It is also worthwhile, in this discussion, to consider the social climate at the time in which those ‘rules’ were adopted: WWI had not long ended, a variety of so-called ‘innovations’ were being experimented within Freemasonry especially in France and in the USA. Both those countries had, incidentally and by that time, regular Lodges that admitted women (though the USA situation was reversed not much later) – and it is worth recalling that at that stage women, except for Australia and New Zealand, did not as yet have the vote, nor would they have for, in some cases, numerous decades, in part amidst widespread concern that it would bring the end of rational civilisation. A ‘tightening’ of any ‘experimental alterations’ was generally the prevailing mood, both within and outside Freemasonry. As an example, the vast advances and progress that had been made in attitudes prior to WWI took steps, after WWII, that reflected the social conditions of *decades* previous to those times, and it was not until some forty years later (ie, in the 60s and early 70s) that a move towards more generous attitudes was again able to make headway.

This, inadvertently – though I am pleased it occasions mention – also leads to considerations about the exclusion of half of the adult population from potential membership to our Lodges. There is no *Masonic* reason⁹ for the ongoing exclusion of women, and their continued denial of membership only reflects a closed-mindedness at odds with the fundamental impulse of Freemasonry. Again, that such a change may incur

9 – I am well aware that article III of both Anderson’s *Constitutions* and Dermott’s *Abiman Rezon* specifically mention excluding women. It stands to reason (excuse the pun) that a society or club that promulgated *rationality* would of ‘necessity’ exclude those it deemed *irrational*, ie, women.

the wrath of other Grand Lodges is neither here nor there, and it is interesting to note that the former Grand Master of the Regular Grand Lodge of Italy has also mentioned in a paper from some years ago that perhaps the time is nigh to consider such¹⁰.

In practical terms, these two suggestions that I see as naturally arising out of considerations of the central impulse in Freemasonry, *ie*, allowing for personal belief to remain a private issue, and the non-exclusion of potential women candidates, is something that needs to be handled with soft white kid gloves, yet that reflects that fundamental spirit of Freemasonry in its acceptance of diversity – something that, unlike most other Grand Lodges, we seem to be near-uniquely stuck in maintaining and propounding uniformity even in our centralised-determined ritual! This need not be the case, and a variety of ritual, a variety of visitation rights, and a variety of dress, would quickly be seen as better reflecting contemporary society without diminishment to the *principles* of Freemasonry.

Secularism is at times described as being reflective of both progress and the kind of civilization we have come to take for granted in the West. It seems to me that any organisation that reflects attitudes that are easily seen as, and with good reason seem, ‘backwards’ (in respect to those same considerations) will inevitably plummet in both social standing and membership, and this even more so if its impulse at play in its core development is itself the same impulse that gave rise to modern western society. Conversely, adaptation to contemporary society, maintaining of the central impulse at work in Freemasonry, would maintain its ritualistic, allegorical, and symbolic powers of bringing plenitude to its current and

¹⁰ – Bro. Fabio Venzi, M.W. Grand Master of the RGLI (2002-2005) – which is in amity with UGLE – now if only I recalled which paper!

future membership.

First and foremost, however, a recognition of our own foundations amidst the Deists, humanists, rationalists and secularists of former times will, hopefully, permit the spirit of secularism to remain vibrant, thereby also allowing the various ways in which Freemasonry's allegories and symbols may be variously understood and interpreted according to the diverse aptitude, inclination, and interest (both exoteric and esoteric) of its members, thereby also continuing to assist development of individual moral autonomy and contributing, both as individuals as well as communally, to a more just society.

And on this, I (temporarily) end...

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