

Recently at a Festive Board a brother said to me “Surely, you are not one of those who believes freemasonry originated in 1717, are you?” He made what he felt was a convincing case for the proposition that speculative freemasonry developed from the old medieval stonemasons’ lodges, or guilds. Another brother joined the discussion, but his view was that the Craft developed from the medieval Knights Templar since the penalties used therein were simply not compatible with the stonemasons’ guilds suggested by the first speaker. In his defence he cited the chapel at Roslyn which bears some apparently Masonic symbols on its walls and elsewhere. A third suggested the medieval Mystery Plays of which he had read in “Freemasonry Today”, as a source of origin. I cannot agree with any of these points for reasons that I will try to explain. But, if I disagree with my friends on this fundamental issue then where do I stand on the subject of the origins of freemasonry?

Over the years there have been many attempts to give freemasonry greater credence by proving its “history”; and for a good reason, as I will explain later. The Reverend Dr James Anderson MA, a member of the “premier Grand Lodge” of 1717, (the “Moderns”) who wrote the first Book of Constitutions in 1723 as a rulebook, included a ‘history’ of the Order apparently tracing its origins back into Biblical legends. Again, in the 1930’s a second Reverend gentleman, Dr J S M Ward set out, in a book still available today, although I think out of print, to prove a link between freemasonry and the ancient rituals and traditions of other cultures thus proving that freemasonry has existed since time immemorial. More recently, a third Reverend gentleman, Rev. Neville Barker Cryer, suggested in a Prestonian Lecture that the Craft developed from the medieval Mystery Plays. An extract of that Lecture appeared in the Masonic magazine to which my friend referred.

However, I believe that freemasonry was developed by the intellectuals of the “Age of Enlightenment”, as a set of principles by which to order their lives and the lives of others for the greater good of mankind and as such it is probably no older than 300 years, or so. After all, the first recorded initiation of an Englishman into freemasonry was that of Elias Ashmole, one of the earliest fellows of the Royal Society, at Warrington on 6 October 1646. Since we only know of this event from a note in his diary we have no idea of the ritual used, but interestingly, Edward Sankey completed one of the earliest Masonic catechisms, the Sloane MSS 3848 on that day. Edward was a relative of Richard Sankey who was present at that initiation and so I suppose we can be fairly confident that this was the ritual used.

Before going any further let us look at what I mean by the Age of Enlightenment. I am talking here about a period of English history around say the late 17c early 18c. Indeed maybe most of the 18c.

In an earlier century the monasteries, the traditional seats of learning had been broken up by King Henry VIII’s Reformation and the monks dispersed throughout the land. Grammar schools had been established and learning was, therefore, available to a much wider section of the community, although still to a very large extent based on class and privilege.

The late 17c was an age of tremendous upheaval as well as one of great discovery. It was also a time of great political unrest. As an example, Thomas Paine’s pamphlet *Common Sense* attacking hereditary government and advocating the colonies

independence from Britain can without exaggeration be said to have inspired the American Revolution and the subsequent loss of that colony. His great tracts that followed, *Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason* can strike us as far ahead of their time – advocating real democracy, attacking slavery and proposing a kind of welfare state. But these were ideas being discussed in the coffee houses of the time.

The invention and subsequent development of machinery like, for example, Watt's steam engine and Arkwright's spinning jenny led to an exodus from the land to the town, from the field to the factory since conditions in agriculture were poor, to say the least – failure of the harvest was commonplace and starvation a fact of life. The hope of a brighter future in the industrial towns seemed attractive, initially at least.

As I say, the “Age of Enlightenment” was a time for questioning for exploring and examining everything. The horizons of the world and of the mind were expanding daily at a truly remarkable rate. For example, an idea current at the time was that man's reasoning alone was sufficient; he would use his experience of the world as a basis for everything – including proofs of the existence of God, and this is shown in our Craft ceremonies.

The important point here is that the new ideas and scientific discoveries challenged traditional thought and the established order of things and were thus considered dangerous or at the very least viewed with suspicion. This is a point to which I will return later.

Although there is no proof that Sir Isaac Newton was a freemason nevertheless his ideas and revolutionary scientific discoveries had a very strong influence on the members of the four London Lodges that formed the “premier Grand Lodge”, in 1717. Whilst the membership records of Lodge of Antiquity No 1 do not exist further back than 1772 nevertheless many of those involved in the “premier Grand Lodge” were members of the Royal Society and thus to a greater or lesser extent intellectuals and scientists in their own way. It is true, of course, that membership of the Royal Society could be bought so that it is not always easy to know who were true scientists and who merely rich hangers on. Remember that at the time the divide between the Arts and Sciences, as we know it today was not so clear-cut since any person who remained after graduation at Oxford or Cambridge was required to take holy orders. The prosecution of their scientific activities often proved far from ideal for the parishioners who, if they were lucky, were left in the care of an underpaid and overworked curate, or otherwise left to fend for themselves. Sir Christopher Wren whose magnificent architectural vision produced St Paul's Cathedral was also an influence, although again he was not necessarily a freemason. Astrology and astronomy were seen as a way of reaching up to God, to the Heavens, to discover His Divine purpose, and what better way to celebrate that purpose than by building a cathedral in the heart of London. Obviously, since this country was Christian, although at this time Protestant rather than Catholic, then that culture would have the greatest influence, but the influences of Rosicrucian thought encompassing the cabalistic, alchemical and hermetic ingredients as well as Sufism are also evident in our ceremonies. Equally the stories of the Crusades and the saintly Knights Templar would also have played a part in their thoughts, as would the Mystery plays put on by the medieval guilds.

I do not say that freemasonry sprang fully-fledged in 1717: I accept that it developed over years. I do believe, however, and this is the crux of my argument, that early freemasons drew from the variety of philosophical and political sources and the new scientific discoveries available to them to develop their ideas into the freemasonry we know today. They felt that by applying those new discoveries and thoughts to one's way of life it was possible to develop a better man, more in tune with himself, his fellows and his God. Brotherly love, relief and truth.

Now returning to the earlier point about the challenge of the new ideas. One must remember that the accepted system of education in the 17c had been developed in medieval times by Alcuin (732-804), and had not changed over time. It divided the seven classical liberal arts and sciences into two groups. The first three, known historically as the trivium, comprised Grammar, Rhetoric and Logic. They were followed by the quadrivium, (Arithmetic, Geometry, Astronomy, and Music.) Astrology, rather than Astronomy, was an important element of classical learning, as was geometry, both of which you will find in our ceremonies, and whilst by this time no one believed it possible to transmute base metal into gold still the philosophical ideas behind alchemical theories were important. The operative alchemist had but one aim in view – the transmutation of base metals into gold – nevertheless there was in the late medieval days a body of spiritually minded alchemists to whom the principle of transmutation was in itself little more than an allegory. One writer on the subject points out that *“alchemy was in its primary intention and office the philosophic and exact science of the regeneration of the soul.”* As a parable for a way of life therefore it provided a powerful and very useful lesson. Rosicrucian thought concentrated on a spiritual alchemy with the idea of improving the soul by learning. (Surely this is the theme of the Second degree?) Let me expand on that regeneration of the soul for a moment as it appears in every one of our ceremonies in one form or another, the most obvious being the Third degree. Put simply it was that the soul passed through three transmigrations on the path to perfection, the first two proving a slip.

There are in the two philosophies, alchemy and freemasonry, certain coincidences, for example the stress laid on regeneration of the initiate – the idea of being born again runs throughout alchemy, as it does in freemasonry; the secrecy taught by freemasonry was insisted upon by alchemy. I think this illustrates my point quite nicely.

Lastly, for the moment, on our little journey into the realms of 17c metaphysics, the Philosopher's stone of hermeticism makes an appearance in several of our ceremonies; some admittedly beyond the Craft.

By now the “new” science of chemistry, as we now know it, was developing to such an extent that it was pushing alchemy into the background, but even Newton was not willing to pass up the old ideas without a thorough investigation. However, the startling new ideas of Newton, Hooke, Thomas Paine et al were a challenge to the established order, and it was for this reason that many of the “old” ideas are carried into freemasonry and a “history” was essential to give credence and respectability to the Order.

It would be far too easy to dismiss Rosicrucian thought as medieval mumbo jumbo, but it should be remembered that as far as the intellectuals of the time were concerned

everything was in the melting pot. In fact, the Rosicrucian manifestos are perhaps the most influential of the idealistic and fervent writings of the first half of the 17th century and so it is not surprising to find that Rosicrucianism and Anglo Saxon freemasonry share a common ideal, that of harmony under God. Indeed Bro Bernard Jones, writing in the mid 1950's states that: -

It is just and proper to admit the possibility of our Craft degrees having been influenced by individual Rosicrucians, but to dismiss utterly and completely any suggestion that speculative freemasonry is largely a survival of the Rosicrucian cult or is the seventeenth-century invention of its adherents, organized or otherwise.ⁱ

(See his *Freemasons' Guide and Compendium* (1950) and *Freemasons' Book of the Royal Arch* (1957) for much more detailed consideration.)

Behind this was the seriousness with which religion was taken as part of the quest for new understanding; but splits of varying severity had opened up across Christendom. Some were prepared to risk danger and give their lives for the old religion, hallowed by apostolic succession, headed by the Pope in Rome. Others were adamant that authority came by the word of God and free grace alone. They also risked their liberty and lives, not just within Roman Catholic territories. Nevertheless it is important to remember that our early brethren were Christian in the same way that all decent citizens were in those days and so familiar with the Biblical parables and the illustrations given in his sermon by the preacher from the pulpit each Sunday. It simply never entered their heads that anyone could pray without invoking the Holy Trinity, or making his petition to the Throne of Grace without doing so "in the Name of our Advocate and Mediator, Jesus Christ". What better way then of attaching a history to the Order than to draw on the Bible stories?

At around that time a remarkable picture bible was produced with illustrations of, for example, Noah's Flood, the Tower of Babel and the parting of the Red Sea; but more significant was the fact that on one page would be an illustration from the Old Testament whilst on the facing page the equivalent from the New Testament. Readings in our ceremonies from the prophet Isaiah therefore would have been readily understood since the more learned brethren would also appreciate the New Testament significance. For example, the first words of the Book of Genesis accord so nearly with the opening words of the Gospel according to St John, and there are many others that you can find for yourselves.

Now, whilst most historians agree that the basic ethos of freemasonry remained essentially Christian nevertheless, the fact that it is open to all men and all religions is in large measure due to the work of Rev. Dr. Anderson. At the time religion and politics were inexorably linked and there was a need for a wider population to be embraced. As an aside it has been suggested that the Mystical degrees, with their strongly Trinitarian Christian influence, developed in England as a reaction, but that is a story for another day. Rev. Dr. Anderson was a Trinitarian whilst Newton was a Unitarian by the way. Nevertheless whilst the VSL on which the candidate takes his obligation is that relevant to his own faith it is surprising how many of the world's great religions converge on certain points.

Finally I return to my original point about the origins of freemasonry, medieval mystery plays, Knights Templar or stonemasons' guilds.

Let us be quite clear, whilst King Solomon may have been responsible for the building of a Temple at Jerusalem he was not a freemason, as we know the term today. Nor, indeed were any of the other biblical characters that appear in our ceremonies. Hiram Abif is mentioned briefly in the Bible but has nowhere near the significance or powers he is afforded in our Masonic rituals. Those of you who are members of the Royal Arch will recognize Ezra and Nehemiah but they were not even around together at the same time, according to the Bible. Again, the stonemasons who built the medieval cathedrals of Europe were just that; stonemasons, builders in stone, they were not freemasons. They did not need complicated secret words or funny handshakes to identify themselves, as they did not travel far in their work. The great medieval cathedrals after all took many years to build. And lastly, the Masonic Knights Templar of today has no connection with his medieval predecessor. The demise of the medieval Knights Templar is well documented but briefly King Philip le Bel of France owed money to the Lombards, the Jews and the Knights Templar. He paid off the Lombards and dealt with the Jews in the way Jews have been dealt with over the centuries. That left the Knights Templar, a powerful organisation neither owing allegiance, nor paying taxes to any sovereign power but only to the Pope. Having persuaded the weak Pope that they were involved in blasphemy and other crimes against the doctrines of the Holy Church, on Friday 13th 1307 the king ordered that all Knight Templar throughout France were arrested. The Pope called the Inquisition, carried out by the Dominican monks and most Knights were burned at the stake or died under torture. It is from this event that the view that the penalties and thus freemasonry derived from the medieval Knights Templar arises. There is a legend that some escaped to Scotland and fought at Bannockburn but that is unproven, (and unlikely). The legend goes on to suggest that they joined Scottish stonemason's lodges and brought secrets with them. Those secrets are illustrated on the walls of Roslyn Chapel it is suggested and proves the link. A fanciful idea that may sell books and films but to my mind is just that – fanciful. However they all find a place in our ceremonies since each degree can be seen as a little play, or parable illustrating a topic, the whole developing into a fitting moral theme, and a way of life.

I think that in order to put their new revolutionary thoughts and ideas into a practice acceptable to the times in which they lived, our Masonic predecessors needed a formal structure, and this is where the stonemasons' guilds came in. They took the form of those guilds as that structure. Its grades of workmen: apprentices, craftsmen and masters, and its pledges to obey the rules of the trade organisation fitted their plan admirably dealing as it did with purely *practical* matters: the formal entering of an apprentice, the communication of Lodge and Trade, i.e. Guild, secrets and the inculcation of simple ethics; and in them was usually a Charge in which a more or less fanciful "Traditional History" of the Guild was expounded, and in which (as far as the stonemasons' Guild was concerned), there were naturally many references to King Solomon's Temple. Our speculative 1st and 2nd degrees, the Installation of a Worshipful Master, and the so-called Antient Charges are familiar and obvious examples, as indeed is the Royal Arch and the Mark degree. However to get their message across in a dangerous political age it was felt necessary to veil the message in allegory and illustrate it by symbols.

In conclusion, I hope that I have shown that far from being based on the rules and regulations of the medieval Knights Templar, or from stonemasons' guilds per se, or even the medieval Mystery Plays, the Craft degrees of Anglo Saxon freemasonry are the result of the thoughts and ideas that bubbled up during the Age of Enlightenment when everything was so fresh, so new, so up for grabs!

As Bro John Acaster put it in a recent lecture:

“For all these potencies swirled round and round together in the crucible of early 17th century metaphysics. Poetic and allegorical writings gave utterance, while emblems and symbols provided cryptic and compressed illustration. The horizons of the world and of the mind were expanding daily; all arts reflected this intellectual pregnancy; the very languages of expression were multiplying. In like manner, monuments left to us by that age often seek to be meaningful, speaking, eloquent of eternal truths, not, as so often later, channelled into the merely grandiose, platitudinous, respectable or pathetic.”

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