



## *What's in a name ? A lodge called "Freedom of Conscience"*

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When we came to choose a name for our new lodge, we hesitated between two possibilities. Would we call it "Freedom *and* Conscience" or "Freedom *of* Conscience"? In the end, we decided that the latter choice would allow a richer scope of exploration of three distinct but nonetheless related concepts: "freedom", "conscience" and "freedom of conscience".

The concept of freedom is ancient and ubiquitous in all of philosophy. For many people, liberty is a dream. Even for us who live in democracies and often hold our freedom for granted, its real fulfilment remains a distant utopia.

In antiquity, freedom was considered to be limited by Man's flawed understanding of nature and by the will of the gods. In the teachings of the early Church, Man acquired his freedom only by the grace of God and by faith. Thus, Man is in a state of complete dependence.

The Renaissance brought about an evolution of the concept of freedom. Descartes extended it without separating it from God: the will of Man is infinite, but his understanding is limited; he must therefore develop his knowledge in order to avoid error. For Erasmus, Man "is not born a Man, but becomes one", and must therefore cultivate his free will. Hobbes and Hume enticed him to explore the world by observation and experiment.

Later thinkers liberated Man from the will of God. Locke and Kant believed that Reason is Man's essential faculty for guiding his choices (if only he dare use it) and a tool to achieve real freedom. With the spread of knowledge made possible by the Encyclopaedists, the Enlightenment cleared the way to scientific, social and philosophical progress.

Nonetheless, more recent philosophers introduced other kinds of limits to freedom, such as social determinism (Marx), a fear of the Other (Sartre), and the mysteries of the functioning of the public sphere (Habermas).

Nowadays, even in a democratic society, our freedom is constrained less by the established powers than, more subtly, by our own thoughts and behaviours, by individualism, egocentrism and materialism.

Throughout its history, freemasonry has evolved in parallel with the development of new ideas and sometimes even provoked it. Today, it remains one of the best schools of freedom in the world. By teaching its initiates to "leave metals outside the Temple", by providing them with a protected space where they may find harmony and reward through the promotion of tolerance and brotherly love, and through work and study, it equips them for the quest of the true freedom.

***Freedom of Conscience Lodge of liberal and adogmatic freemasons***

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The idea of conscience may at first appear less timely than that of freedom, but it is its essential complement.

Conscience is commonly defined as the ability to distinguish right from wrong. In both antiquity and religions, human conscience is closely associated with standards set by divine powers. Reprehensible actions are those that provoke the jealousy of the gods, and evil is the transgression of the commands of God or the Church. According to Marcus Aurelius, to do good is "to do one unselfish action after another with God in mind. Only then is there delight and stillness... Our only rewards in this world are an unstained character and unselfish actions."

Selfishness is considered as inherent to evil, whereas conscience is our ability to be mindful of others when choosing our actions. For St Thomas Aquinas, judgement based on conscience is imperfect because of our incomplete knowledge of the nature, and is often corrupted by education and by habits that encourage selfishness. Some people appear to be less "morally enlightened" than others and too weak to temper their own needs in consideration of others.

During the Enlightenment, conscience was seen as Man's innate ability to consider other people's interests. Man is a social being and he has the consciousness of belonging to the human community, leading him to live according to the moral law. This "universal connection" is Kant's categorical imperative: "Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." In its second formulation it reads: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end."

Thus, regardless of whether it is connected to God, to charity or to a feeling of belonging to the human community, our conscience regulates the exercise of our freedom.

This leads us onto our third concept: freedom of conscience, a basic principle that contains an imperative of absolute tolerance and the assertion of an unwavering faith in all mankind.

Freedom of opinion, including those touching on religion, is a basic human right, provided that this freedom is also respected for other people. Thus, liberal freemasons hold that all beliefs, religious or not, are of equal value if they are compatible with the moral law, as defined above by Kant and as expressed in Article 4 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of 1789 ("Liberty is the power that belongs to man to do whatever is not injurious to the rights of others"), and in the 18<sup>th</sup> Article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 ("Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.")

This requirement for tolerance also relies on the belief in perfectibility of Man and of society.

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When, in 1877, the Grand Orient of France abolished the requirement for its members to assert the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, it did not, as argued by some, "open the door to stupid atheists". Neither did it deny the legitimacy of religious beliefs. Instead, it advocated an opening towards a conception of universal humanism whereby all men and all belief systems may aspire to attain the ideal of perfection.

The mission of our lodge, Freedom of Conscience, is to bring together masons of all faiths and backgrounds. In this sense we do not differ greatly from "regular" masons. We are open to all men and women, good, true and free.

We call that *freedom of conscience*.

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