



Ritual and Symbols: What use in liberal freemasonry?

Introduction

Before addressing the question before us, it may be useful to clarify a few terms of the trade. Some have become household terms in sociological and political conversations, but occasionally with fashionable connotations, and legitimate or less legitimate shifts in meaning in the service of particular interests. I shall set aside those circumstantial shifts in meaning and focus on core features relevant to our purpose today.

I shall then highlight the main steps in the evolution of the masons' ritual as a mirror of history, equipped with symbolic paraphernalia, which resulted in the ritual of the liberal and secular masonry of the Grand Orient of France.

Finally I shall evoke aspects of today's practice of rituals and use of symbols in the light of our constitutional principles, our commitment under oath and our method of work. I shall submit to your sagacious reflexion avenues for their critical reappraisal in the light of societal needs and expectations in the 21st century.

Definitions

In vernacular parlance, a ritual is a collection of rites, as the compendium of rules prescribed for religious practice or, by extension and somewhat more secularly, voluntarily and spontaneously adhered to in worship of some incarnation of values considered worth cultivating.

Ritual prescriptions are most often laid down by some authority, religious or otherwise, presenting themselves as initiated intermediaries between some reference of divine or superior essence and the flock of common devotees, intent on ensuring full conformity of the practice with a dogma. A dogma, as an established corpus of beliefs or doctrine held by a religion, ideology or any kind of organization is authoritative and not to be disputed, doubted, or diverged from.

More secular rituals often develop and apply arbitrary rules which are considered appropriate to convey feelings and respect towards an idea or personality. This stance is devoid of clerical authority and remains inborn, unless some capitalize on it in the pursuit of ulterior motives.

Symbols, on the other hand, are tokens or implements deemed suitable to represent abstract concepts in an intuitive manner. While the origin and the functioning of symbols in the human community that uses them can be rationally analysed, they are understood without the need for an explanation. The word *symbol* came to the English language by way of Middle English, from Old French, from Latin, from the Greek σύμβολον (*sýmbolon*) from the root words συν- (*syn-*), meaning "together," and βολή (*bolē*), "a throw", having the approximate meaning of "to throw together", literally a "co-

incidence", also "sign, or contract". Symbols pervade social relations in everyday life. From the trivial hand-shaking, indicating non-aggression, to wearing a royal crown to impress a sense of authority, from displaying a tattoo or piercing as a sign of belonging to a group to offering presents, symbols make it easy to convey untold messages. Worn out through repeated use over longer periods of time, the original meaning tends to fade away and reduce the vehicles to conventional empty shells.

Rituals and symbols are still today the hallmark of freemasonry among societies and groups intent on pursuing philosophical and philanthropic interests. Contrary to the practice of others with similar interests, they form in free-masonry an integral part of the specific methodology governing our efforts. A look at the history of the so-called Modern French Ritual provides evidence of both its essential continuity and its responsiveness to changes in society.

History

The first record of speculative Masonic activities dates back to the middle of the 17th century. Elias Ashmole's, secularly known as the one of the founders of the Royal Society and author of the monumental publication of 1672 entitled *The institutions, laws and ceremonies of the most noble order of the Garter*, retrospectively annotated his Diaries, formally started in 1679, with a view remember them as a basis of a planned biography. He indicated from memory that on 16 October 1646 at 4:30 p.m. he was made a free-Mason at Warrington in Lancashire. More than the slim record of the event, that note is the first evidence of the existence of speculative Masonic Lodges, of which only three are known, some 70 years before the Grand Lodge of London was established in 1717 at the Goose and the Gridiron Ale-House in St-Paul's Churchyard.

The early lodges appeared to have grown out of earlier Craft Lodges primarily devoted to supporting the interests of the fellow craftsmen of their trade and providing mutual support to their members.

There is no record of any ritual or symbolic armamentarium. Although Ashmole later showed a keen fascination for esoteric and hermetic studies, there is no factual evidence that such aspects may have attracted him to Masonry, nor that such a flavour existed. After the 1660 Restoration, on the contrary, a number of intellectuals and aristocrats linked to the young Hanovrian monarchy joined the existing Masonic Lodges, which they saw fit as a think tank, as we would put it today, to support their political objectives. Engineered by John Theophilus Desaguliers, action was taken to eventually bring the largely independent and poorly organised Lodges under control. Some resisted fiercely, to the point of burning their archives rather than surrendering them to the new authority, a defiant act which mostly destroyed historical evidence of the early days of Masonry. In order to establish an unquestionable legitimacy of the reoriented lodges, the new intelligentsia charged James Anderson with the task of writing the constitutions, eventually published in 1723 as *The Book of Constitutions of Masonry*. In a manner similar to contemporary history rewriting for political or ideological purposes, he would assert a Masonic ancestry going back to time immemorial, but simply forgotten due to the carelessness of successive guardians. The mythology was meant to command allegiance of the Lodges to the Royal power circles.

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Recent research work on the origins of free-masonry has revealed that Ireland on the other hand, had had known students' guilds, presumably at Trinity College, Dublin as early as 1688, which were gradually turned into Masonic Lodges equipped with sets of rules and procedures for admission (embryonic rituals) intentionally different from the practice in England. Grouped into a formal Grand Lodge of Ireland between 1725-1730, they adorned their founding myths with more legends and esoteric symbols. They laid down their rules of procedure in their own constitutions known as the Pennel Constitutions in 1730, which were largely inspired by the Anderson Constitutions. They claimed greater legitimacy, however, on the ground that they were more ancient, therefore more authentic and respectable. As opposed to the the "ancient" rites, the Masonic practices of the Grand Lodge of London was dubbed "modern" by derision. Neither of them recognised the other as regular and fought bitterly for prominence until both grand lodges eventually came together as the Unified Grand Lodge of England in 1813.

In the meantime, from 1745 onward, members of the Jacobites Regiment, who had fought for the restoration of the House of Stuart sought refuge as Catholics on the European mainland, particularly in France. A number of them were members of lodges in London and founded in 1725 the first lodge in Paris, whose members all came from England. They used the rites of the "Moderns", which eventually became the Modern French Ritual as it is known today. The adoption of many customs of the ancient rites into the practice of the Unified Grand Lodge of England, such as reintegration of prayers and the celebration of Saint John determined the split between Masonic customs in England and France. It is safe to say that the French ritual is truer to the practice of the Grand Lodge of London, and that the claimed differences between them are more ornamental than substantive.

The French ritual continued to evolve during the 19th century, under the influence of the political and societal circumstances. In the societal exuberance of the late 18th century, a flurry of commentaries passed through the Modern French Ritual, with flavours of Egyptian or Scottish references, of uncertain origin. There was a certain fascination with orientalism and religious universalism. This resulted in the first half of the century in various versions of the ritual, written in rather convoluted and heavy style, with moralizing and deistic connotations. In the mid 19th century, the trend for the free-masons to become involved in the emergence of the republican, liberal society led to radical changes in the rituals, with drastic simplification almost down to the bone in the language. The ritual of Murat of 1858 adopted a mix of references to the republican trilogy Liberté-Égalité-Fraternité and strong emphasis on the belief in God and the immortality of the soul.

With the subsequent push of positivism symbolic and emotional features, considered vectors of dogmatism, were officially abandoned: no more allegories, no more superstitions, no more magic. That was considered rubbish from the past: everything must now be rational, enlightening, explicit and pedagogical. This resulted in the 1887 revision by Amiable and was reinforced in 1907 by Blatin.

While many lodges nevertheless remained inclined to use a measure of symbolic references, others started meeting with next to no ritual at all and almost functioned as Republican committees. To preserve a sense of unity among Masonic lodges, the Grand Orient of France felt compelled to remind all lodges of the need to maintain, over and

above their preferred ceremonial and working practices, a level of discipline and Masonic specificity in their activities. Amongst such a variety of tendencies, unity could only be preserved by stricter observance of an appropriate ritual.

Striking a balance between the innovative and the traditionalist, between the rationalist and the symbolic approaches, Arthur Groussier eventually succeeded in 1938 in combining the more meaningful elements that had appeared through decades. He built a framework where all Masonic sensitivities would find themselves at home while having enough space to express their own specificity and diversity.

The narrow path

What does history tell us of the ritual under the Grand Orient of France?

It tells us about a framework, rather than a strict prescription.

It tells us first that the Masonic ritual, as it prevails in France, is a powerful framework designed and gradually refined to accommodate all philosophical sensitivities in a unique time-space, epitomized as brotherly love.

In Masonic symbolism, proper use of the ritual is conducive to the emergence of the *egregore* or collective Masonic experience. Doctor Pierre Mabille, a prominent follower and author of several books on the Surrealist movement, defines *egregore* as « a group of humans going collectively through an experience that none of the partaking individuals could have arrived at in isolation. One the prerequisites for it to happen is the existence of a powerful emotional chaos that is eventually resolved with highly energetic input.

Contrary to other rituals, the Modern French Ritual is not a straight jacket designed to have devotees come to recognize a pre-set, unquestionable truth or to consider only authorized topics. It is essentially a tool that enables the Lodge (i.e. the assembled community of members) to engage in creative speculative work of a philosophical nature with philanthropic aims. More significantly, the way in which the ritual is put together clearly shows that the themes for discussion, including societal concerns, that have played such a major role in periodically reshaping and re-scoping the overall pattern, are extraneous objects rather than intrinsic parts of the Masonic ritual *stricto sensu*.

In application of the general rules of procedures and by-laws of the Grand Orient of France, which stipulates that the Lodges are free and sovereign in their work, choosing one or the other topic for consideration is the sole decision of the Lodge, in the absence, under the Grand Orient of France, of any superior authority, provided that the manner in which the discussion is conducted in the Lodge is respectful of the ritual as a safeguard of key Masonic values and principles: personal enlightenment, mutual tolerance and respect, self-disciplined contributions, unquestionable freedom of conscience and of speech.

In that context, the choice of symbols is very flexible and will be adapted to the collective experience of the Lodge and of each of its members. They are indeed part and parcel of the supporting iconography. To that extent, they deserve to be the subject of scholarly studies and investigations, as much as any mythology, poetry or other form of art.

Beyond that, however, does it make sense to use a ritual and symbols to realize our Masonic commitment? I think that, if we want to have a chance to face the real world, to progress in our knowledge and understanding of ourselves, and to contribute philosophically to the improvement of the destiny of all men and women, they make

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sense only if we keep on equal footing the elements of a trilogy “where and when-how-what”.

The ritual defines the “where” and “when”. Masonic activity is supposed to develop in a special time and space, with no physical limits but the horizontal infinity spanning the four cardinal points of the universe from East to West and North to South and the vertical infinity of the starry sky of the members’ utopias. Being nowhere specifically, our activity applied everywhere. It has no historicity either, as there is no before and after, but timeless present spanning from midday to midnight. Being timeless, it is devoid of any contingency, in a way it is eternal.

The symbols are visual reminders of key parameters to be applied in doing so. Activated by the ritual, they promote moral values such as rectitude, justice, honour, determination, etc, that should preside over the Lodge’s activity. They indicate that all present stand upon an exact equality, regardless of creed or race. They remind everyone that in demeanour, in conduct, in ceremony and in language, members will honour their oath to seek no reward of advantage, to solely desire better knowledge of things and entertain no greater wish than being serviceable to their Brothers and more generally to their fellow creatures.

As much as the ritual alone becomes an empty shell, and the symbols alone a toy for sophisticated dilettantes, debating philosophical issues, whether societal or political in the wider sense, without ritual and symbols, is an activity for political circles and party committees. We see in everyday life that such debates seldom result in harmonious progress, but invariably produce winners and losers, victory of the stronger over the weaker. Only the three elements together are the quintessence of free-masonry. Admittedly not suitable for political action, Masonry should not be perceived as a threat to the mechanics of governance. By virtue of its universality and timelessness, in line with the three-order vision of French philosopher André Comte-Sponville, our role should remain focused on relentlessly questioning the world as it goes, and on pointing at inadequacies violating the principles of strict equality and justice among humans. Equipped with rituals and symbols, let’s act with determination and demonstrate that our choice actually makes sense.

Thank you.

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