

Silence, Symbols and Secrets of Freemasonry

by Jacques Huyghebaert

Introduction

For the non-Freemason, one common question is to find out whether, as often stated, Freemasonry is a secret society and that question is often further linked with a pre-existing suspicion that any form of secrecy may represent a danger for the government, the society and the individuals.

Being Freemasons, we know that these fears are unfounded .

All of us, having been non-Masons until the day we were initiated into Freemasonry, we also know that anyone who sincerely wants to find out about Freemasonry can do so. What we did, sure others can do !

We can also assume that the overwhelming majority of all those who call themselves Freemasons, would resign and dissociate themselves from Freemasonry, if they were ever to find out that Freemasonry is or would become incompatible with the moral duties they owe to God, their country, their neighbour and themselves.

If Freemasonry was the evil organisation its enemies accuse it to be, I have no doubt that Freemasons would be the first to desert the Order.

To those who are not coming with sincere questions but with defamatory allegations, Freemasonry has traditionnally responded only with silence and disdain. Not worth, spending any time ...

But when these attacks have been part of a wider scheme to crush all liberties, for example under the Nazi and the Communist regimes, and when Freemasons have been hunted down, jailed and sometimes murdered along with other groups persecuted for various reasons, they are known to have readily joined in opposing and fighting the oppressors to regain their lost freedom.

In such tragic circumstances, masonic secret, mutual trust and brotherly love take a noble signification - which we should be proud of.

For indeed, in Freemasonry, we are enjoined to follow the example of that truly distinguished man, who choose rather to lie down his life than forfeit his integrity ...

Yet, in those countries where freedom, lawful authority and peace prevail, non-Masons and sometimes even Freemasons question the

need for secrecy and secrets in Freemasonry .

The Masonic ritual states that "these secrets allude to Freemasonry alone." What is meant by this sentence can only be discovered and fully understood, by becoming a Freemason.

From the very moment when, he is first led into the lodge, on the day of his initiation, to the moment of his solemn obligation, to the moment when he is taught the traditional penalty, to the moment he is given the signs, grips and words, the candidate is constantly warned and instructed about his essential duty to keep inviolate all the secrets of Freemasonry.

Later, all along his Masonic career and life, regardless of the number of degrees and high positions he may receive, every Freemason will constantly be reminded on the first and most important of the Masonic virtues.

Secrecy : Why ? Why is it necessary, What does it mean ?

The answer to this important question is to be found not without, but within Freemasonry.

To be understood the Masonic concept of secret needs to be related to other aspects of Freemasonry ; they are triple :

SILENCE, SYMBOLS and SECRETS.

SILENCE

Silence, not secret is what the Entered Apprentice actually promises to observe. What secrets does he know ? none !

So it is not secret, but instead silence that matters.

In continental European lodges, the Entered Apprentice Mason is informed that Masonic tradition requires that he refrains from speaking while the lodge is at work. By doing so, he is taught his first "secret" in Masonry, which is that by being silent while his senior Brothers speak, he may discover what is more important : to listen. By doing so, he will need to submit his passions and he will eventually improve himself in Masonry.

Additionally, it should be remarked that silence has another important role, which has been analysed by the French ethnologist, Jean Jamin in a work entitled " Les lois du silence" (The laws of silence), a study dedicated to the social importance of secret in African tribal societies

The author remarks that, in the traditional sense, an African initiation is much more and admission ceremony rather than an event during which where actual secrets are being communicated.

Those secrets : some mere words and signs, all senseless and childish in appearance, are a bitter disappointment after the long and painful often physical ordeal the candidates have been going through. The real reward for the neophytes is not being now acquainted with some mysterious secrets, but having been admitted into a very respected and small group.

The main purpose of an African initiation, he states, consists simply in placing the newly admitted members in a position where only two options are possible : to remain silent or to betray.

Thus, the ethnologist, goes on, the role of the solemn promise of silence that is imposed upon all the African initiates, is to create a strong bond between the neophytes and the group they now belong. By doing so, he concludes, "secret " has been conferred a real though in fact social existence.

"Secret" is also a topic to be found in "The Imperial Animal" a book written by Lionel Tiger and Robin Fox, two American ethnologists.

Their conclusions are very similar to those reached by Jamin :

1° initiations are part of a classical pattern of behaviour in all primitive societies;

2° the main activity of groups conferring initiations consist in secret but apparently futile ceremonies at the occasion of admission of new members and when moving up the ladder within a strong hierarchically structured group;

3° For outsiders the image is that initiation is a high mark of favour reserved to only very few and that membership includes access to secrets.

4° Secrecy is considered by the initiates to be a traditional way to ensure loyalty and solidarity.

SYMBOLS

The wole teaching of Freemasonry is said to be symbolic.

For a Freemason to discover the "secrets" of Freemasonry

consists mainly in studying the "hidden" sense of symbols and allegories that can be observed in the Lodge and during the Masonic ritual and ceremonies.

The young Entered Apprentice may be inclined to believe that these ancient symbols are meaningless, that the ceremonies have now become antiquated if not simply ridiculous, and he might be tempted to reject too hastily that what lies beyond the field of his still profane understanding.

But if the secret teaching behind Masonic symbols is simply to convey a moral message, however wise and respectable it may be, why this need to keep secret what should be made available for the benefit of all ?

These symbols can be compared to a series of keys, allowing to open doors and enter successive rooms.

These precious keys should not be given to the ignorant man for he would not know how to use them, nor to the intolerant man for he would misuse them, nor to the overambitious man for he would desecrate them.

If ever threatened by force or otherwise to give the secrets of Freemasonry, the Mason will know that none of these secrets can be unduly obtained, for above the solemn obligation to silence, is a material impossibility to betray these secrets. Some words, grips and signs have been published over 250 years ago, they can be repeated by anyone, but one has to be prepared to grasp their meaning, to see their significance, to hear their message.

It is like the famous Greek Mathematician Euclides, who was taken to the court of Pharaoh in Alexandria and threatened to be put to death by Ptolemy Philadelphos, in the 3rd century B.C., if he persisted in refusing to give the secrets of Geometry. To Pharaoh, Euclides is said to have answered that putting him to death would not have made Pharaoh any wiser, for the only way for him to obtain these secrets was to learn Geometry like he had done.

SECRETS

Masonic symbols are the keys to a long, difficult but rewarding spiritual journey, it is a thorny road which we have to travel by ourselves. Our Brethren can help us, but at the end of the day, nobody can do it in our stead.

Initiation does not consist in receiving any type of knowledge that can be written or said, or perceived by the five senses of human nature, but is an introduction to a type of totally different knowledge, where the Brother will learn mainly to use his heart to conceive the beauties of Freemasonry.

Then nothing will remain neither occult, nor secret, for the intention of of the Fraternity has never been to hide, but only to transmit through the succession of ages, the most excellent tenets of our Institution.

The sense of symbols, first very obscure, will progressively became clearer, and those words that the young Entered Apprentice can only spell with difficulty, will be read later with ease if he patiently perseveres.

He is guided symbolically when he is given the first letter of the word. But he has to discover the second letter himself. In due time, the third letter will be communicated to him in order that he may uncover the next.

This symbolic approach, held in high esteem among the peoples of Antiquity, is still used today by Freemasons but has nothing to do with a craving for secret or mystery, nor has this method become obsolete.

Much to contrary, far superior to the confusion of words and of languages, Masonic symbols, so expressive, are more fitting than ever to imprint upon the memory wise and serious truths.

Let us hear what Dr. Albert Schweitzer had to say about this :

" When truth, knowledge or wisdom cease to be understood, they do not live any longer in our minds."

"When knowledge is reduced to a mere dogma that is blindly accepted, it may appear to survive for some time, while its rules are still being slavishly observed. But as its underlying coherence and justification is being lost, truth is soon distorted and breaks into pieces, in the same way that the dead body decays and falls apart under the effects of putrefaction."

"When truth is communicated directly, without requiring any effort from the recipient, it will not leave a lasting impression, for most human beings live day by day and are not capable of forming their own opinions ".

"So, it is necessary that all elevated ideas, be created again and again by each one of us in ourselves. Only when we attempt to follow with trust the inner road of our individual thought, can we hope to attain living truth"

"Living and profound reflection does not fall into subjectivism."

"It drives, by the force of its own intellectual power, notions that Tradition regards as true and attempts to transform them into knowledge".

Tho this spiritual path the Masonic ritual alludes, when it states to

the candidate at his initiation that he will need to go the same way as all Brothers have done, who have gone this way before him.

By their individual work, Freemasons can contribute to the construction of a better world. By their ideas and the example of their life, Freemasons can help in spreading more fraternal human relations.

Being sincerely in search of "that which was lost", enlightened by the Wisdom of Silence, fortified by the Strength of Symbols, each Freemason has the inner capability to reconstruct the Beauty of Secrets in his heart.

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