

**THE GREAT ARCHITECT OF THE UNIVERSE IN THE FRENCH MASONIC TRADITION :
HISTORICAL PROBLEMS AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS**

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First of all, I would like to thank you for your kind invitation to take part in this meeting of the Cornerstone Society. As a Masonic scholar – for it seems that I am regarded as such by some indulgent people – so, as a Masonic scholar, I know how interesting are the works of your Society. And, sincerely, I feel most honoured to be here today.

Twenty years ago, when I was introduced to Masonic research by my master, my late Brother René Guilly – a most respected scholar who wrote under the pseudonym of “René Desaguliers” – he told me that Freemasonry being of British origin, nobody could understand anything about the Royal Art without a sufficient knowledge of British history, British culture and also British character – something usually very strange for a Frenchman !

It was not difficult for me to accept this prerequisite for, my grand-mother being Norman, since my early childhood I have been convinced that my ancestors had taken part in the Battle of Hastings ! More seriously, for ten years I have spent much time with Robert Gould, James Hughan, Herbert Poole, Harry Carr, Colin Dyer, Eric Ward and Neville Barker Cryer – or more precisely with their books – and found a great pleasure and intellectual satisfaction in discovering Elias Ashmole, Randle Holme, Robert Plot and, later, James Anderson and Jean-Théophile Désaguliers – let me call him by his French name – the Antients and the Moderns, William Preston and... all the others !

From the study of all these papers, I got one major fact – or, at least, a fact which seemed to me to be of great importance and significance for a French student: British Freemasonry was not only fascinating, it was fundamentally... British! It is not a joke, it is very serious and a key for well understanding the realm of Freemasonry wherever it has spread over the time. And I don't say that only because today I am in England, speaking to an English audience, trying to make it forget that the French are not serious people...

The starting point of my reflection is that Freemasonry, when it set up in continental Europe and especially in France, approximately in the 1720's, did it by accident. It was not in the normal scheme of things, it had not been planned. The first Freemasons in France, English, Scottish or Irish, had not decided to cross the Channel, but did it under duress, for well known political and religious reasons. And even after the first lodges had been established in Paris, we know that Derwentwater was opposed to the admission of French members.

Unfortunately – or by the grace of God, who knows ? – a few years later French Brethren were in majority in French lodges : something apparently rather normal but in fact totally unexpected.

I would like to insist on this point which is my central hypothesis: the first Freemasonry, the Masonry of the Premier Grand Lodge, was not universal in the full sense of the term : it was “locally” universal. Universal in Great Britain where it was, among other things, a social and intellectual answer to the religious and political problems of the country. But it was transferred as such to France that was a really different nation, especially from a political and religious point of view.

During all the Age of Reason, the Age of Enlightenment, French Masonry really lived in a continual ambiguity. Ambiguity as to its official status, firstly. The Grand Master for about thirty years, the Count of Clermont, was a prominent member of the Royal Family, and his successor, in 1771, was the Duke of Orleans, who was officially the “First Prince of the Blood Royal”... but during all that time, Freemasonry had no legal right to exist, and never got any official recognition by the authorities. Moreover, it had been condemned and forbidden by the Pope, for the first time in 1738 and once again in 1751. It is true to say that the papal bulls never had the force of law in France because the King – supported by the French Church – kept jealously his absolute power but, nevertheless, he was officially the “Very Christian King” and fidelity of the throne to the Catholic Church was a major part of its legitimacy. So, after the French Revolution of 1789 and the fall of the First Empire in 1815, when the Bourbon dynasty was restored, Freemasonry was gradually regarded by the authorities and

especially by the right-wing of the French society, as a den of radicals – or at least of dangerous progressive men – in politics as well as in religion. During the course of the 19th century, if you attached great value to the ideals of tolerance, liberty of conscience and universal fraternity, Freemasonry was the only place in France where you could put these tenets into practice, and by the end of the century, just doing that was being involved in politics. Had the old French monarchy taken the way opened some decades before by the English one, and French Freemasonry would have probably developed in a different way. Of course, we cannot be sure and it is better like that: an historian is not a novelist...

The fundamental misunderstanding between French and British Freemasonry, since that time, is not purely Masonic but originates from the many differences between our two countries, regarding culture and civilization.

If we could understand, all of us – I mean, each of us on his side – the precise nature of these differences, we would be able to better evaluate the real distance between the two varieties of Freemasonry that exist on both sides of the Channel, and probably we would be led to the conclusion that the reality is significantly different from all we have been told for years – or, at least, far more complex.

I would like briefly to untangle some of the misunderstandings which unfortunately have arisen. The question of the GAOTU is a perfect illustration of this problem.

France is an old Catholic country – not of this “oldest catholic religion” referred to in the first *Book of Constitutions* compiled in 1723, of course : France was the first great nation entirely devoted to the Roman Catholic Church – in the 19th century a Roman Prelate called it “the Elder Daughter of the Church”. It was true from the baptism of Clovis in the 5th century to the French Revolution of 1789; it was still true in the 19th century, in spite of other revolutions which were often hostile to the Church; it remained true in the beginning of the 20th century, even after the separation of Church and State; and it is true nowadays, but in very special way : it is true that our nation is an old Catholic one, despite the fact that, according to a recent opinion poll (*Le Monde des Religions* , January 2007), only 51% of the French consider themselves as Catholic and only 15% go to Church at least one time a month. But, more amazing and typically French, 50% and not more of French Catholics believe in God and 80% of the latter see God as a force, not a personal being, 60% believe in the Resurrection of Christ and 40% in the Trinitarian nature of God. Finally, 60% of them don't believe in the virginity of Mary...

What were the real religious opinions of French Catholics in the past ? We can't know, but I suspect that they were not very different from what they are today. The only difference was that before the French Revolution it was forbidden to declare oneself a freethinker, and in 1766 – not in the Middle Ages! – a young aristocrat, the Chevalier de la Barre, was burnt alive because he had refused to raise his hat along the way of a religious procession.

French culture, architecture, social structure, political institutions, have been deeply influenced by the Church since the very beginning of France. The Church was one of the mainstays of the King but, in return, it was the sole admitted religion. Remember the tragic Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, in 1685, by King Louis the 14th : then, all the protestant ministers were banned from the kingdom and all the believers of the Reformed Faith were compelled to convert to Catholicism. All children of ministers under the age of 15 were obliged to stay in France, cruelly separated from their parents, in order to be educated in Catholic families. One of them escaped, hidden in a barrel: his name was Jean-Théophile Désaguliers...

Do you know that in 1877, when the GODF (the Grand Orient of France) decided to remove from its Constitutions, not the mention of the GAOTU – no – but the compulsory “belief in God and the immortality of the soul”, the Grand Master – who was styled, in that time, “President of the Council of the Order” –, Frédéric Desmons, was a protestant minister ? Is it really surprising? I don't think it is. For a curious reason that you can probably understand, now: because even for a protestant minister, in France, the meaning of the word “God” was Catholic ! It meant the power of the Church, the submission to the Church, the rejection of liberty of conscience in religious matters. Centuries of intellectual domination and, too often, of persecution in the name of... “God”! Can you imagine ? Even nowadays 50% of so-called French Catholics don't really believe in God but can't publicly admit that because to do so would mean that they could not properly be considered to be Catholic ! But, let me

remind you of the fact that, in 1877 or at any other time, neither the GODF nor any other Grand Lodge in France ever suppressed the mention of the GAOTU. Of course, you probably know that, nowadays, in the majority of the lodges of the GODF, there is no reference to the Great Architect, but the great majority of all French Freemasons – including many members of the Grand Orient –, perhaps 80% of them, when opening or closing their lodges, invoke the Great Architect.

So the final question is: why is it usually so difficult for French Freemasons to declare that the GAOTU is God ?

Not because they are special – or bad, or false – Freemasons. But only because they are French AND Freemasons. They have to bear, within themselves, Masonic tradition as well as French intellectual history.

And an additional question: why is it so difficult for the English to understand that ? I would suggest that the two questions have a common answer, and I do believe that trying to clarify this point is also a common duty for all Masonic scholars, French as well British.

For a few minutes, try to enter into a French mind. Yes, I know, it is a little disturbing and maybe dangerous, but I think that the experience could be very interesting for you.

Imagine that, since your very early childhood, you have been educated in a Catholic country where, in every village the church, often so lovely, is Catholic, and where the 15th of August, the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin, is a public holiday of the Republic, and imagine, at the same time, that one century ago, the State and the Church were separated. Imagine that there is officially no place for religion in the State and yet, every year, a Mass is celebrated for the beginning of the new parliamentary session; no official place for religion at school but a chaplain for the catechism in almost every school. A country where there is a magic word: “laïcité”, considered as one of the pillars of the Republic, but a French word practically impossible to translate into any other language, especially into English : a word which means neither freedom for all religions nor the contrary, but something between the two. Imagine all that: you are not in Alice’s Wonderland or in a schizophrenic world, you are in France.

A country where the most important concern of everybody is to have an opinion on everything, where there is always someone to be for when the others are against and against when they are for; a country where philosophy is taught at school.

A country, finally, where 50% of Catholics don't believe in God without any problem.

And now let's go back to French Freemasons. Do you think that they come from the moon? No, they come from an old country where words are like toys, and one of life's pleasures is playing with them. Not like a cat with a ball of wool, but maybe like a cat with a mouse: because this game is apparently vain or cruel, but in fact a serious game. It is the game of life.

For French Freemasons, Masonry is not only a fraternal society where you can make good friends and exercise charity towards people in distress. For them, to be a member of the Craft is not only a sign of social respectability or a kind of religious statement. Of course, for some of them, Freemasonry can be one of these things or all of them but, fundamentally, Freemasonry is an intellectual commitment.

That's why, for them, the GAOTU is not “simply” God: because “God” is not a simple word, or not simply a word. But for most of them, once again, there is a moral, intellectual and spiritual “keystone” in the masonic building, and they call it “GAOTU”.

And now, I have a dream.

Would it be possible for Freemasons, on both sides of the Channel, to forget their narrow and limited vision of each other ?

For many French Freemasons, an English lodge is the outbuilding of a parish church : something dark, strained and boring. And we know that it is not true. So, when someone tells you that a French lodge is an outbuilding of a political party or a society of radical freethinkers, just don't believe it.

I have a dream. My dream is that all Freemasons could build the Centre of Union, not because they are similar on all points – they are not, of course – but precisely because all of them are imperfect human beings, sharing one nature – humanity – and one feeling – hope.

So, Brethren, let us hope together...