

“We are what we eat, n’est-ce pas?”

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Brethren, I chose the title of my talk to titillate your taste buds. In my experience Freemasons in England are always interested in food. Like the weather, it is always so variable. One is pleasantly surprised and delighted when it is good, and when it is rather poor, the subjects of weather, or food on the table, provide common ground for a good grumble and rather agreeable mutual commiseration. Both seem to me to form the basis of typical English philosophical attitudes. Philosophical attitudes...do we have them?! It might even be alleged, unkindly, that such grumbles all too often form the sum! In England, we are too often and too largely what we eat. Of course, it also gives us our particular sense of humour!

The second part of my title, “n’est-ce pas”, was chosen with an eye to welcoming and including our very distinguished visitor from France, Dr Roger Dachez. “N’est-ce pas” is a marvellous interrogative in French, which never declines and is invariable. That is to say, “isn’t it” (which is what “n’est-ce pas” means) is used in all situations where we in England might say, “Aren’t they”, or “Don’t you think”. We personalize the question: the French impersonalize it. “N’est-ce pas”, which might merely be considered to be a throw-away remark, can be held nevertheless to represent a microcosm of the remarkably intellectual focus of French culture. I think you will find in Roger Dachez a real thinker, a Masonic and living embodiment of the stimulating difference I am and shall be trying to express. In many French Lodges, and indeed across the Continent, the brethren usually call off and do hold discussions –not political, but philosophical; there is challenge regularly built in for brethren to think, and to search, and to share.

But when I chose my title I was unaware of the overall theme given to this Cornerstone Conference which is “The Beauties of True Godliness”. I had wondered at the outset why I had been asked to speak. I had, of course, been rather flattered to have been asked, but had I been told then what the subject was I was expected to address, I would have been somewhat taken aback, even horrified. I feel rather like one of those panellists on the radio who are asked to speak without hesitation or deviation for 60 seconds on some subject about which they have next to no knowledge so that the audience can have a good laugh! The difference in this case is that I shall be speaking for nearer 60 minutes, and you’ll be lucky if you can raise a laugh during any of them! No wonder that Julian Rees, when he heard of my proposed title for this talk, “We are what we eat, n’est-ce pas?”, fired back to Mark Qualter: “You’re joking; he must be pulling your leg”! Well, it has to be admitted there is some small discrepancy between “The Beauties of True Godliness” and “We are what we eat, n’est-ce pas”, but I like a bit of a challenge, and I’m sure you do too, otherwise you would not be here.

I started by saying that English freemasonry lays a considerable importance on food. I’m not going to dwell on this. My few words on this subject are intended to be of the nature of an ‘hors d’oeuvres’. The main course, the ‘plat du jour’, is to follow. In England we take for granted that after every Lodge or Chapter meeting we will usually sit down for a formal meal. Occasionally this may be a buffet. But, one way or another, every brother will have had the opportunity to have a varied and substantial meal, taken at ease. It is as natural as

breathing. It is convivial. It is 'living together', as the Latin word "convivium" means. Nothing wrong in this; on the contrary, much that is good.

But the English form is not by any means universal. One merely has to cross the border into Scotland to experience, as I'm sure many of you have, a different attitude to dining. There, except at Installation meetings, the consumption of food is much more simple and informal. There is no lack of conviviality, but it takes a different form. Similarly, so I'm told, the usual after-Lodge proceedings across the United States of America are brief and light. No doubt Roger here can tell us in due course what form is usual in France. I've seen what happens in Denmark, which is rather similar to English practice, in other words, a good sit-down affair and much clinking of glasses, but altogether neater and precise, even fastidious. No one in Denmark would slop food altogether on a plate as we do here; each piece of the repast, neatly presented and garnished, is taken selectively to the plate, eaten with style, separately, in its turn. While so engaged, brethren in Denmark are dressed very formally in white tie, with those of rank wearing collarettes, and others discreetly wearing miniature jewels. Dining there is distinctly an occasion, with the atmosphere of an officers' mess. Of course, apart from the correct dress and formalities of toasting there is nothing particularly special about this for the Danes. As regards the food, the style of its preparation, presentation and order of service is as natural as breathing.

The interesting thing, surely, is that these habitual forms of refreshment are so different in each country. Why should this be so? Why should English freemasons expect a three or four course meal while the Scots are satisfied with a pie and a pint, or mebbe a bevvie and a wee dram or twa? Of such simple but profound questions it used to be said jokingly that "The answer lies in the soil", and indeed it does. It lies in the soil of geography and history, and in the national culture which this has produced.

And, as it is with food, so it is with freemasonry. In terms of this talk we are now leaving the 'crudites', the simple raw constituents of the first course, to begin to sample the main dish, the 'plat du jour'. In Freemasonry we have all started, in whatever country, with very similar, even identical, ingredients. Those basic ingredients appear to have been first supplied from Great Britain. One can argue the case for them starting in Scotland around 1599, as Professor David Stevenson has done very ably, or for their undoubted intensification and popularisation following the success of the so-called 'Premier' Grand Lodge in London from 1717, or indeed point to the Irish impetus which has so enriched our rituals and scattered freemasonry around the globe. This is not the place to weigh up the respective contribution of these ingredients: the key point is that the principles, the ingredients, were quite similar in each case. In fact, they largely reflected adherence to the authorities and code of conduct enjoined in the 'Old Charges' of the Mason Craft known from late medieval times.

I want to move away from history and to talk about the present day, but our appreciation of a little history and geography is inseparable from my central theme (which what it is that makes us what we are and eventually, when we reach the pudding course of this repast, how all this stands with concepts of 'true godliness').

From England, or Scotland, or both, the French gathered the ingredients of freemasonry. I think Roger will agree that they were very enthused by them, so much so that they added quite a bit of spice, plus various other native ingredients, and cooked them up into pretty exotic dishes from time to time. In no way do I wish to appear pejorative. They found

Masonry and quickly fitted it to suit their own circumstances, needs, and tastes. From the second quarter of the 18th century, right up to the Revolution in 1789, French freemasonry was full of excitement and exploration, sometimes linked to social climbing, sometimes to contemplations of social reform. Freemasonry provided one of the few means, under the French monarchy, whereby aspirations towards a better future could be shared and, furthermore, within the setting of a Lodge, excitingly put into practice. Just as French food is regional, so were (and largely are) its various freemasonries.

After the Revolution, and its disruptions, and the victories won by arms against reactionary forces, the French nation could eventually find common cause in “Liberte, Egalite, et Fraternite”, which chimed so well with secular freemasonic ideals. A continuing “reactionary” presence was the Roman Catholic Church. Education proved to be a key battle ground on which French social reformers, including freemasons, clashed with the Church in an effort to open access eventually to all, freed from old fears of prejudice, manipulation and indoctrination. In the name of freedom and equality all sorts of other entrenched traditions were challenged, including that of the role of women. Why should women be taken for granted and kept subservient? So it was natural that they were allowed a place in the Masonic world. During World War II many French freemasons, as well as those elsewhere in Europe under occupation, were systematically exterminated by the Nazis and their totalitarian allies. The glaring anti-Masonic posters and black-shirted, booted Fascists which we occasionally see in books are not mere ornaments—they depict reality! All too true reality within the lifetime of millions yet living! By this brief account you may appreciate that French freemasonry, as a pre-eminent example, has found itself, by virtue of its own dominant ingredients and its geographical and cultural environment, impelled towards actively defending liberties and extending them. In consequence, the President of France nowadays conducts consultations through freemasonry (as well as other media). Its leaders, from time to time, have been welcomed into the Elysee Palace.

I do not need to speak to you about the equivalent background in England. We have lived a comparatively easy existence. Social unrest has been relatively patiently borne and gradually adjusted. We have always had the freedom to voice discontent to our masters in government and to formulate a social conscience which has, from time to time, eventually, become empowered through democratic consensus. Nationally we have never had to suffer untrammelled authoritarian rule. [Masonically, however, there have been such periods in England; but that is a subject all to itself!] In other words, in England we have been lucky enough to live under relatively benign conditions. We have thus been able consistently to ingest one of Anderson’s key ingredients within British freemasonry: “A Mason is a peaceable subject”, never to be concerned in plots and conspiracies against the peace and welfare of the nation, and cheerfully to conform to every lawful authority. This has continued to form the basis of our Second Charge.

Another key ingredient in Anderson’s reformulation in 1723 was his First Charge: “A Mason is oblig’d, by his Tenure, to obey the moral Law; and if he rightly understands the Art, he will never be a stupid Atheist, nor an irreligious Libertine.” He went on to express the requirement only “to oblige them [Masons] to that Religion in which all Men agree, leaving their particular Opinions to themselves; that is to be good Men and true, of Men of Honour and Honesty, by whatever Denominations or Persuasions they may be distinguish’d...”. Unless you wish me to later I will not examine the nuances contained within this famous statement: it is sufficient to say that the official British opinion on the matter is markedly at

variance with the interpretation placed upon it by many freemasons in France and elsewhere on the Continent. The later, now current, version of this First Charge in England runs:

Let a man's religion or mode of worship be what it may, he is not excluded from the order, provided he believe in the glorious architect of heaven and earth, and practise the sacred duties of morality.

It goes on, perhaps significantly, to state:

Masons unite with the virtuous of every persuasion in the firm and pleasing bond of fraternal love; they are taught to view the errors of mankind with compassion, and to strive, by the purity of their own conduct, to demonstrate the excellence of the faith they may profess

In England particularly, under a reformed religion, parliamentary democracy, economic stability, island geography, and military muscle when needed (all confirmed through our quiet Glorious Revolution of 1688-89) we have been able to maintain both respect for law and an automatic attachment to these old principles. They have not needed to be challenged. They work comfortably, and we get on, quietly digging our gardens, driving our cars, going to church or playing golf, eating our Georgian four-course meals, and toasting the Queen. Our Masonry has reflected the stolidness of this tradition, and we have always been able to afford respectable dining: meat and two veg, with gravy, at the very least. But this has not been so across the European continent. This has suffered famine and repression. Conditions have quite often been raw. The inhabitants of all countries there have had to choose, to think, and to fight. Their freemasonries have been shaped within that struggle. It may not be surprising in such circumstances that Masonic principles and structures have from time to time been called into play in the battles for social liberation, for democracy, for abolition of the death penalty. Thank God that we in England (since the Normans!) have not had to endure tyranny!

One ingredient in particular was added in the 1730s to the Masonry passed on from England to France. It has flavoured continental masonry ever since. It seems to me to contain the essence of our difference. It is what is known as the 'Discours de Ramsay', and to us as 'Ramsay's Oration'. It purports to be an overview of what freemasonry is about. It was framed in terms most appealing to the gentlemen of France: classical, artistic, aristocratic, and patriotic. It asserted a vision:

Men are not distinguished essentially by the languages they speak, the customs they have, the countries they occupy, or the dignities they bear. The whole world is only a Grand Republic, of which each nation is a family member, and every individual a child. Our Society was established to re-establish and spread these ancient maxims taken from human nature: wise philanthropy, pure morality, and artistic taste. We wish to unite men of enlightened mind and agreeable attitudes, not only by the love of high art, but even more by the grand principles of virtue, where the interest of the Fraternity becomes that of the whole human race, where all nations can draw upon solid understandings, and where all subjects of different kingdoms may get together without jealousy, live without discord, and cherish each other lovingly without being unfaithful to their native country...the unique object is the reunion of minds and hearts, to make them better, and to form in due course one spiritual nation where, without lessening the duties which the difference between states requires, a new

people will be brought about which, among many nations, will cement them all together to some extent by the bonds of virtue and science.

Now this vision so grandly stated, and linked conveniently into a mythical past drawn from Crusading knights, could never have been enunciated in England. It comes in fact from a Scots-born Jacobite with romantic longings enamoured with French taste, the son of a butcher ennobled as a Chevalier. Is it unfair to compare its grandiloquence to the rhetoric supporting the European Union?

In England, freemasonry is personal. It is to be absorbed by the individual. It makes good men better, as individuals. It does not seek to change society except by promoting the virtues of fraternal love and charity. In England, freemasonry is essentially humble, and that humility is derived from enshrined acknowledgement of the greater Divine. This is the meat on which we have been fed. And we have conformed to it. We are comfortable within it.

That said, this brings us naturally to the pudding of this discourse, and the theme of this Cornerstone conference: the Beauties of True Godliness. Wherein does the beauty of true Godliness lie? Can someone who finds it impossible to accept the existence of a Supreme Being, Great Architect, Grand Geometrician, Most High, and ultimately Omniscient, Omnipresent, and Omnipotent Judge of All, with a sacred and mysterious Name, ever be said to exhibit the beauties of true Godliness? To what extent are the beauties of true godliness identifiable, in any case, with the aims of freemasonry? If what we practise reflects “that religion in which all men agree” (to use Anderson’s famous phrase) to what extent might that fall short of ‘true Godliness’? Godliness is not, these days, of course, by any means an exclusively Christian property. These are all things to ponder; the pudding is a rich one. A lot of custard, crème anglaise’, has been thrown over it.

What can be said about English freemasonry (I have refrained from using the loaded term ‘Anglo-Saxon’) is that it has been formed from the VSL. It is largely faithful to biblical tradition, with additions, admittedly, of some complementary esoteric mythology. It is grounded on scripture, even if its specifically Christian revelations have been plastered over. In this sense it is recognisably more faithful to its medieval past, despite later changes and additions, than those merely taking humanism as the base. It is also more faithful in practical terms: those of avoiding causes of disharmony within the Lodge, and in doing nothing which would bring the Craft into disrepute. In this way English freemasonry is pietistic and deliberately apolitical. It concentrates on charity. These positions, I suggest, are good ones from which to promote the deepening of godliness.

But they also carry certain defects. They tolerate passivity. They encourage self-satisfaction. They all too easily lead to sterility and insularity—a lack of interest in, and empathy for, others. With these defects English freemasonry, as a movement, can never be said to exhibit the beauties of true Godliness.

No—until we remove the blinkers to look beyond our own horizon, until we remove our ignorance—ignore-ance—of other forms of freemasonry, until we are capable of understanding and respecting the sincerity of different forms of freemasonry, until, most especially, we become more passionately alive in understanding, expressing and acting upon our own, we shall never approach the beauties of true Godliness, as a Craft, or as

individuals. As some pagan once said, 'Know Thyself', and as a humble carpenter later advised on his journey through this life, "First take the beam out of your own eye..."

I always like bitters after my meal, don't you? I find them good for the digestion!