

DOES FREEMASONRY HAVE A SOUL?

© John Acaster, November 2001

Editor of the Manchester Association for Masonic Research Paper presented at the Cornerstone Conference held in Manchester, 10 November 2001.

'Avisé la fin!' 'Take care to consider the end'. I was very impressed with this advice, adopted as a motto by the former Earls of Peterborough, when I came across it about a decade ago. I think it makes a fitting reminder to me especially, but is appropriate to us all, as I start my reflections on the theme of 'Does freemasonry have a soul?' Many people, on hearing the title of this talk, would no doubt sniff and think they were in for something whimsical. After all, the consensus of modern philosophers is to doubt that individual human beings have a soul. And if human beings are self-indulgent in thinking of themselves as each having a unique, immortal identity, defying analysis, how much more stupid in the 21st century to ask whether an institution may have one. It surely represents obscurantism, of a backward sort, when the driving force of our age is for 'getting real', for practical objectives, for effectiveness, efficiency, cheapness and convenience, those cardinal virtues of the market. (Incidentally, the twin pillars at the entrance of today's public edifices are, fashionably, best value in delivery and transparency of conduct.)

Well, I hope that by the end of what I have to say you will emerge with something that may be of practical help in contemplating that most interesting of questions, the knowledge of oneself, or, in this case, the knowledge of ourselves as Freemasons. It is particularly important that we obtain a better understanding of ourselves at this point of time when we are (a) facing the need to explain ourselves to the public and (b) being expected to make alterations to enhance the attractiveness of what we do. I bring no special expertise to this topic. I do not step from a university chair. I have not conducted surveys. Like many around me, I am a master of arts and sciences from having emerged from the master's chair and having spent 30 years in the Craft. I have spent a similar period of time in banking which, during my time, was generalist and customer-centred. I have dealt with widows and with princes, with icecream sellers and architects, with dealers and policemen, with charities and quoted companies, thrusting entrepreneurs and teetering bankrupts. We have them all in the Craft. And from learning how the practical world makes its living, I then moved on to inspecting schools. As a lay inspector, acting ultimately for OFSTED (the English Office for Standards in Education), I see how, on the ground, in Cumbria, Leeds or Hastings, the intellectual capital of our country is managed and promoted. From the inside, therefore, I have acquired some broad knowledge of our national culture, or cultures. I am a local councillor, so see a little of public administration and can make judgements of its social responsiveness. I am a past Churchwarden of Manchester Cathedral, and thus declare my interest in things spiritual. I have observed, read, thought and written on all these things. But I have few recognised qualifications and my approach must necessarily be an empirical one. With this caveat, I will now plunge in.

What has always surprised me is how FM has survived to the present day. I can easily empathise with the ordinary public who are incredulous that grown men can associate together so frequently to enact little plays, in stilted and archaic language. In England, these odd types can easily be picked out, going about their masonic affairs in dark clothing and ties carrying, as often as not, a queer type of case to hold their rather ludicrous aprons. The Quakers were lampooned for similar eccentricities or archaisms and dropped them after about 250 years. They then concentrated on their landmarks, or more properly, universals, and dropped the accidentals of habit. Their beliefs are today well recognised to have been socially progressive (no newspaper would now throw stones against them). Their members are respected, not least because they make a virtue of independent thinking, God-centred, combined with self-discipline. Not so with Freemasons. Yet, as we all know, the popular image of FM is terribly distorted. The really odd thing is that many Freemasons are passionate about the Craft. Many are more passionate about it than they would be about their branch of religion. (So as not to be misunderstood, I should clarify that they might well feel as strongly about Christianity or Judaism, for example, but be quite critical of the Church of England or the Reformed Synagogue.) That passion in society is rare. It deserves investigating. It is the answer to the mystery of why FM has survived. Its roots are not easy to define, but they should be nourished. This quality of attachment differentiates FM from the golf club, or even Rotary. That is what this talk is about. It is what I have termed the 'soul'. Whenever speaking about FM it is also necessary to be cautious. The caution I refer to is not what you are thinking of. My caution is one which is not sufficiently spelt out or repeated. It is that FM is various. It is represented in many different forms, and in many different cultures. Like all human institutions its character also varies with each generation. If truth be one of our tenets, we slip too easily into error when generalising about FM. We need always to apply the square of place and time. I have seen French television shots of freemasons making demonstrations against the Pope, which would be unthinkable in England. Much of French culture is anti-clerical and highly sceptical of religion, as is reflected in their largest masonic allegiance, the Grand Orient. Yet in Scandinavia virtually every freemason has to profess Christianity currently, for it is intimately enmeshed within the practices of the Swedish Rite. Will that continue to be so in fifty years time? To the square of time and place has to be added the vertical axis of obedience. By this I mean the type or Order of FM being practised. Thus Craft Masonry in England has a different style and focus to, say, that of Mark Masonry. The Royal Order of Scotland has an approach which differs from that of the Order of the Secret Monitor. I hope the point is clear; that all these, and many more, experiences are encompassed within the bounds of 'freemasonry'. They are subsumed within the term while being widely different. If we are to say anything sensible about the soul of our movement, it is necessary to disentangle the skeins within what is otherwise merely a ball of wool.

So we have established three axes within which to examine freemasonry in attempting an analysis. What else is necessary? Why, an Entered Apprentice could tell us! It is a rule, a gauge, an instrument of measurement, a yardstick. From time immemorial measurement has been applied to tangible goods. Indeed the traditional history in our Old Charges claims the science as our own. The necessity of measurement to further human ends has mothered invention through the ages, from the Pharaohs of the Nile and the coins of Croesus to Whitworth's screw-gauges and the electron beam. A new type of 'ponderacion' is surely needed for non-tangible valuables, which, lacking such specification and evaluation, are becoming endangered. Our sophisticated society, aware more and more of its holistic needs, badly requires a balance sheet broader than the model so far arrived at of simple economy. Thus speaks the banker and councillor, churchwarden and charity trustee. But I digress too far.

In educational inspections for OFSTED we do try to extract and put values upon non-tangible outputs. We assess, as best we can, what the school achieves across the board. We try to unpick what the school does to achieve these results. We then score the quality of these inputs and outputs on a seven point scale, where 1 is excellent (having a very strong impact), 4 is satisfactory (in line with national expectations), and 7 is very poor (resulting in disaffection and low morale). The whole process hangs on a Framework, designed to capture all aspects of the school, including its social context, and the opinions of its users. Inspectors' judgements rely upon evidence and wide experience. Schools are not just about getting the highest marks in an exam. Marks are, of course, important and are vaguely analogous to putting money in the bank. But schooling is charged with developing the whole person, their confidence, interests, enthusiasm, initiative and personal responsibility, and respect for the feelings, values and beliefs of others. To assess how well any school might be building up the dimensions of humanity and purpose within its pupils, OFSTED's inspection framework calls for its inspectors to examine its provision for spiritual development, for moral development, for social development, and for cultural development (a clutch of concepts referred to collectively in the trade as SMSC). I believe this analytical approach offers a very helpful tool by which to assess freemasonry. Why does freemasonry possess this curious appeal? It is an appeal which varies between individuals. The strands of SMSC are found in all parts of the Craft. Individuals like some aspects more than others. We can begin to examine this meaningfully. Those of us who belong to different Orders can begin to quantify what it is they get from each. What is it, for instance, that draws some brethren to prefer the Royal Arch above Mark masonry, or vice versa? How strong is the impact (a key word to OFSTED, as it should be to us) of any Order, or ceremony, in these terms? Can we mark them on a 1-7 scale?

To give an example, take the three degrees of the present English Craft working. Its pre-eminent teachings are moral, with much social content. It lives up to its famous description as being 'a peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols'. The cultural elements are less obvious, though they would once have been strong when everyone knew their bible, and stronger still for brethren who were operative masons. But we should never neglect the very powerful cultural (should I say, psychological?) effect of shared language, shared secrets, and an accepted mode of procedure and expression, which tend to glue brethren together within the individual branches of the movement. There are spiritual episodes in the first degree, moments of apprehension, contemplation, being led blindfolded and penniless, and of release and acceptance into the light. But the second degree is almost devoid of spirituality; social, cultural and moral messages predominate. The third degree is climactic in terms of impact, with very strong infusions in all four categories, and can rightly still be termed sublime. The methods by which this is end is achieved well deserve study and include repetition of form, subtly varied, building power. The three Craft ceremonies, as received from the nineteenth century, combine to make an impressive expression of the philosophy of Ethical Naturalism with some Stoicism added.

However, compare this with the experience of the usual form of the English Royal Arch. The moral content is low. The cultural aspects are arguably of only medium appeal (perhaps enhanced for Jewish brethren). Social elements are stronger, but the apex, intended at any rate, if not often well achieved, is surely a spiritual one, a consummation, the supreme degree. Its ritual trappings derive from sixteenth-century hermeticism. No wonder many Companions find it mysterious, and are either turned off or intrigued according to their natures. Can any of them name the key which is wanting? Can you? I fear it has been forgotten, if ever it was fully known (though I believe I have discovered it). How, then, would you grade the 18th degree in the Ancient and Accepted Rite, commonly known as the Rose Croix? By what means, in what proportions does it achieve its effect? When it falls short of perfection, why is this so? How might its power as an experience, like that of an opera, be improved? I will not go on. It is for each to contemplate how FM, in its various manifestations, achieves its effects. Each Order may care to define its own 'landmarks' by thinking them through in this way if finding them possibly partly obscured by scrub and moss.

Nor do I hold the OFSTED model to be the best for this purpose; it merely provides one analytical model. A Lodge in the twenty-first century does teach, and brethren do learn, but not as in the fifteenth. It is worth pondering the difference from normal educational establishments. Is it an Academy or Lyceum? Is it most similar to Pythagoras' enclave at Croton in Sicily without the mathematics?! If you think this is far-fetched, consider the challenges posed to us as masons. Does any man emerge from the master's chair the same as he came in? A farmer whom I met recently, an excellent Director of Ceremonies, said that he got the greatest satisfaction from freemasonry through its mental challenge and shared contact, so different from the cows and loneliness of his daily life: his masonic role required, in addition to its technicality, the understanding and subtle management of his team as individuals. And, for many of us here today, how much of masonry's appeal and mystique is due to its intellectual puzzle. We worry ourselves plunging into the unfathomable, but occasionally emerge triumphant with 'Eureka' on our lips! To return, dripping, to the concrete, I would merely observe, but think it significant, that there seems to be a much greater emphasis placed on self-development through freemasonry in continental European masonry as compared to that traditional in Britain. Of course, what happens outside the lodge room must complement what happens within it, or freemasonry is hollow, without

integrity or meaning. 'By their works ye shall know them'. That, to me, is the touchstone to our belief, traditionally expressed in love and charity.

An analysis of the profounder effects of freemasonry may require further categorisations than OFSTED's SMSC. What about provision for mystical development? There is a yearning for mystical knowledge/experience in the human psyche, and when it comes it is much prized. The framework and appurtenances of masonic activity within the lodge room, right across the whole body of contemporary freemasonry, seem designed to engender such feelings. Symbolism, with its visual compression of ideas and associations, is a common factor. Allegory is another. Do brethren appreciate as fully as they might the interpretations to be placed on our allegories? I would remind you that in medieval times allegories were conventionally sought to provide a fourfold meaning. There would be a literal meaning, an allegorical meaning, a tropological meaning (a figurative interpretation of the scriptures) and an anagogical (mystical) meaning. Should we be examining our allegories with this in mind? All this is very complex and profound. And, defying exact definition and understanding, we are perhaps moving closer towards the soul. It is my contention that freemasonry is almost unique in its ability to combine man's most fundamental truths and aspirations intimately together. Amongst them are moral truth and beauty, as represented in our homely symbols. These are a 'here below', mirroring imperfectly the 'so above' divine order and ideal justice meted (measured) out by the Great Architect of the Universe in a warp without beginning or end. By participating in the celebration of orderly rituals we are drawn in: the drama is our own, not performed by priests, and the frequency of its reminders conduces towards our individual self-improvement. Bro Neville Cryer has recently, in a talk for Internet Lodge in Leicester, emphasised the cardinal importance of ritual practice in freemasonry; not to be set in stone, but above all to be intelligible and meaningful to all brethren present. It is, or should be, a powerful experience. Hence, from this fusion of shared values and ideals, within a powerful setting which touches our deepest roots, derives the enduring quality of the Order. Our good works of brotherly love and charity are an outward and visible sign, not a token, of the integral moral, social, cultural, spiritual and mystical grace freemasonry imparts.

All this can be described as 'the grand design of being happy and communicating happiness'. But properly understood, the secrets blended in our mystic cocktails are deeper and more subtle than anything that can be written on the label. The golf club provides its own pleasurable satisfactions, but they are partial. Tescos likewise. Guide Dogs for the Blind or the National Lottery, worthy of support as they may be, do not provide a sense of fulfilment. Is football passion comparable? How do religious congregations compare? What other institutions have such a rich heritage and powerful effect on the individual as freemasonry? Is it not worthy to be called an enduring soul?

It is our responsibility to enhance those facets by which freemasonry's inner effectiveness is achieved, discarding those accretions or weak points lessening its impact. And we need also to play to our strengths. I offer one example. If seasoned brethren obtain such deep uplift and pleasure from our activities, why should, in the twenty-first century, women in England not be officially recognised and assisted in their parallel paths? Dogs in the manger have never been popular, it is uncharitable not to befriend those with similar impulses, and the continuance of outdated attitudes offers a most obvious target for public derision. It was the first question a woman police sergeant asked me the other day; why can't women be Freemasons?! (It was, needless to say, across the table at a social event I was at, when I was holding forth!) Should we not be sharing with the world that we offer our own most powerful of all forms of lifelong learning? The rungs of our curriculum are based firmly upon earthly stone and stretch, for those who dare to dream, illimitably into the heavens, above and within. And so, as my allotted time runs out, I return again to that motto of the Earls of Peterborough: 'Avisé la fin', 'Take care to consider the end'. Every master mason is enjoined to do this in one context. It is surely a wise and relevant admonition when considering our personal souls and lives. But it is no less true for institutions. They should consider the ends for which they were created and, as was daily necessary for medieval masons, take care and thought, and spend money, to keep their tools sharpened. If freemasonry exists to remind us of 'the big picture' (which in England is headed by the Almighty Architect), and to delineate the paths of virtue ('the skylle of becomynge gude and parfyghte withouten the Holpynges of Fere and Hope', as an apocryphal medieval text has it) leading us forward in such a manner that we may 'live respected, and die regretted', then that great goal ought never to be lost sight of. It should be honed and adequately resourced. We, individually and collectively, are entrusted to keep the strong mysteries of our Craft fit for that all-embracing purpose. For as the poet says:

We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And to know the place for the first time...

What we call the beginning is often the end

And to make an end is to make a beginning.

The end is where we start from.

TS Eliot, Little Gidding

Avisé la fin!

So mote it be.