

INITIATION AND THE HEART OF FREEMASONRY

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Dear Brethren, it is a great pleasure and a great honor for me to address you today. The organizers of this conference were most kind in inviting me to speak. I am humbled to be part of this program and thankful for the opportunity to share my thoughts with you about the symbolism of the heart and its relationship to initiation in Freemasonry. Before I delve into the subject matter, however, I would like to say a few words regarding the study of Masonry to offer perspective.

Because Freemasonry is such a broad topic and interacts with society on so many different levels its study presents serious challenges that remain largely unmet in the academic world. While Freemasons have often played vital roles in significant historical events, the Masonic institution is little studied and poorly understood in academia. The academic study of Freemasonry was made more complex due to past persecution by various monarchs and totalitarian governments which made Masonic organizations in many countries seek to maintain a private existence with a minimum amount of exposure.

Therefore some of the reasons for the lack of interest or weariness on behalf of academia in studying Freemasonry relate to the fact that it is perceived as a secret society, reluctant to expose itself to public scrutiny and unwilling to offer documentary evidence of its history and activities, if any is perceived to exist at all. In the past, this view may have been more justified in some countries, including the United States, but it is no longer realistic. In reality, there are mountains of documentary evidence available to the academic who is willing to ask, both at Masonic institutions and public research centers.

It is also noteworthy that more and more serious academic centers are being established specifically for the study of Freemasonry and Western esoterica. The real challenge for the modern scholar is penetrating the nature of initiatic organizations and attaining understanding of their unique language. In this light, I will attempt to briefly summarize the circumstances leading to the creation of Speculative Freemasonry to establish a foundation from which to address the nature of initiation and its relationship to the symbolism of the heart.

There are various competing theories about the origins of Masonry, but what concerns our discussion is that the individuals who were active in shaping Speculative Freemasonry likely perceived it as an institution through which men could develop their moral and philosophical potential. Closely investigating the lives of the founders reveals their extensive connections to older secret societies and esoteric traditions that no doubt influenced their perception of the role of the Masonic Order. Speculative Freemasonry was shaped in Scotland and then England, but it has a foundation that consists of more than Protestant Christianity and the meaning and value of the deliberate presence of other traditions in its rituals needs to be taken into account.

The philosophical climate of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Britain was strongly influenced by the underground tradition sometimes referred to as Arcadia, which encompassed within its philosophy elements of Gnostic, Neo-Platonic, Hermetic, and Kabbalistic thought. As Rosicrucianism surfaced in the early seventeenth century in Germany it also showed an affinity to the Arcadian stream of thought. The main characteristic of Arcadianism was the renewal of interest in the thinking and literature of the pre-Christian world. Various Pagan and Gnostic traditions that had survived through the Middle Ages received a certain sense of renewed credibility and promise in the eyes of their adherents, as Renaissance thinking began to place greater importance on them.

In understanding the streams of thought culminating in Arcadian attractions, it is helpful to look before the Renaissance. Kabbalistic thought, for example, had gained recognizable form among certain groups in the thirteenth century, well before Petrarch and the later Italian translations of the Hermetic texts. Throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth-centuries the Scholastics, a group that Thomas Aquinas belonged to, had spent great effort interpreting classical Greek texts from Arabic sources and working them into the literature of the Christian tradition. Equally, one need only to consult the history and plight of the so-called "ABC's of Heresy" (the Albigensians, Bogomils and Cathars) to see that Pagan and Gnostic influence of the early heretical Christian and Manichean movements had survived in Europe long after the Roman collapse.

It was this combination of existing traditions (or remnants of them), the rediscovery of older traditions and the renewed interest in their origins and philosophies that shaped the circumstances in which Speculative Freemasonry was formed. In his work, *The First Freemasons*, Scottish historian David Stevenson argues that the evidence from his research into Masonic origins "indicates that the emergence of Freemasonry involved an act of creation, not just evolution." By noting the key influence of William Schaw and his interest in Hermeticism and the Art of Memory, Stevenson presents a compelling argument of how in the years "around 1600 the legacy of the Middle Ages was remodeled and combined with Renaissance themes and obsessions to create a new movement. ... [W]hat appeared in Scotland around 1600 contains the essentials of modern freemasonry."¹

Thus, if it is possible to trace the history of particular traditions, rites and symbols, with an interpretation associated with them that has historically remained relatively consistent, then it should be possible to define Freemasonry as a traditional initiatic order, even if the particular grouping of these rites, symbols and lessons within a Masonic framework only dates back to the late Renaissance.

Initiation, and its implied pursuit of truth, is the core, defining characteristic of Freemasonry, without which there would be nothing to differentiate the Craft from other social or philanthropic organizations. Initiation, however, is difficult to define. It encompasses elements of endings and beginnings and, properly understood, refers to a process rather than a one time occurrence. As all traditional societies and institutions are founded on a common human spirituality that seeks to return man to the center of his spiritual existence it could perhaps be said that initiation is man's spiritual journey, with the goal of bringing man from the circumference to the center, from the outer to the inner, in order to fulfill the function of 'unmoved mover' in relation to the world that is his.

The heart has traditionally been understood as the center of the human microcosm and the meeting place between the human and celestial realms. Mohammed

called the heart the Throne of God the All-Merciful. Christ referred to this realm of interior when he said “The kingdom of God is within you.” To quote extensively Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a Perennialist scholar:

We have fallen into such a state that the heart has become a hidden crypt, at the center of our being and yet so inaccessible that the itinerary of the spiritual life may be said to be none other than the re-discovery of the heart and penetration into it.

The doctrine of the centrality of the heart to the human state is universal, as is its relation to intellection, sapience and union. The Bible and the Quran speak often of heart-knowledge. In Christianity the Desert Fathers articulated the spiritual, mystical and symbolic meanings of the reality of the heart, and these teachings led to a long tradition in the Eastern Orthodox Church, known as *Hesychasm*, culminating with Saint Gregory Palamas, which is focused on the “prayer of the heart” and which includes the exposition of the significance of the heart and the elaboration of the mysticism and theology of the heart. In Catholicism another development took place, in which the heart of the faithful became in a sense replaced by the heart of Christ, and a new spirituality developed on the basis of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Reference to his bleeding heart became common in the writings of such figures as St Bernard of Clairvaux [a Cistercian who wrote the original rule of the Knights Templar] and St Catherine of Sienna.²

Turning our glance eastward some may recall that the name of the Egyptian god Horus meant “Heart of the World.” In Judaism the heart is viewed as the inner soul of man and the center human state. In Jewish mysticism we find the concept of *levnichbar*, meaning broken or contrite heart, and its adherents are admonished to “tear one’s heart” to reach Divine Majesty.³ The prophet Ezekiel speaks of the “stony heart” that must be replaced with a “new heart” or a “heart of flesh,” calling for a complete conversion of our self to a spiritual orientation.⁴ The Sanskrit term for the heart, *hridaya*, means center of the world. The Sanskrit term for faith, *shraddha*, also implies knowledge of the heart. And in Far Eastern traditions and languages the heart is often equated with consciousness.

While the outer layers of the heart are often considered the arena where the battle between good and evil takes place, there is a deeper and far more profound aspect of the heart that is unreachable and beyond the scope of all contradictions. This is the aspect of the heart that our discussion will be most concerned with. In his *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Thomas Merton, writes the following of this place:

At the center of our being there is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak, his name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven.⁵

In describing this profound, transcendent place, and as can be understood from reading further into his *Conjectures*, Merton was actually referring to what is known as *le point*

vierge, the virgin point. Merton originally came across this concept from the famous French Orientalist, Louis Massignon, with whom he corresponded in 1960. Massignon had developed this term from his study of the tenth-century Sufi saint al-Hallaj, who was known to state, "Our hearts are a virgin, that God's truth alone can open."⁶

In the theology of the Orthodox Church St. Mark the Monk, likely a fifth-century figure, speaks of "the innermost, secret and uncontaminated chamber of the heart... the innermost and untroubled treasury of the heart, where the evil spirits do not blow."⁷ Kallistos Ware, Bishop of Diokleia, in a paper entitled "How Do We Enter the Heart?" writes the following regarding this conversion of thought:

It is immediately apparent that St Mark the Monk, al-Hallaj, and Merton share in common an all-important conviction concerning the character of this deep or innermost heart. For all three of them it is something pure, inviolate, inaccessible to evil; and for this reason it can rightly be described as "the virgin point."⁸

When considering the Masonic apron as a symbol of innocence and purity, it can also be viewed as ultimately directing one's attention to the virgin point. In the Fellowcraft Degree we encounter the winding staircase which is instructive of the path by which the lower passions are transcended. Once the candidate has symbolically mastered his intellectual faculties, represented by the seven liberal arts and sciences, and understood their relationship to his spiritual qualities he arrives at the middle-chamber of the temple, finally prepared to move from the outer to the inner, from the circumference to his own inner spiritual center.

The symbolism of the innermost heart is also connected to that of the cave, and sheds light on the initiatic function of the cave as spiritual center. The well-known Traditionalist scholar René Guénon writes that "the 'cave of the heart' is a well known traditional expression." Guénon notes that "the Sanskrit word *guha* generally designates a cave, but it is used also of the internal cavity of the heart and consequently of the heart itself."⁹ It is also worthwhile to note the relationship of the symbolism of the sun to the heart, as both have a symbolism of centrality, common to all traditional doctrines of the West and East. The Neoplatonist Proclus, in his *Hymn to the Sun*, says: "Occupying the midmost throne, above the ether, and having as emblem a dazzling circle which is the Heart of the World, thou fillest all with a providence apt to awaken the intelligence."¹⁰ It should also be kept in mind that the heart is the organ that fills our body with blood and thereby life, in the same manner that the sun fills the world with light.

In Christianity and in Masonry we find the symbol of the Hebrew letter *yod*, the first letter of the Tetragrammaton, inside a triangle. In this, we find similarity to the Eye in the triangle, and without addressing this in any great depth, it can be mentioned that there is a relationship with the symbolism of the Third Eye, the World Egg and spiritual seed.¹¹ Because the geometric schema and symbolism of the triangle is often equated with the heart and the letter *yod* can be related to the eye, which it can visually resemble, we can begin to understand the Islamic esoteric concept of 'ayn al-qalb, meaning "eye of the heart"—another reference to the innermost heart as the gateway of Providence.

In returning our gaze more specifically to Freemasonry it may be worthwhile to back up just a little bit in order to understand the bigger picture. While Freemasonry is an association that has rules, regulations, archives and minutes, only the direct and oral transmission can communicate the spiritual influence which is the fundamental purpose

of every initiatic organization. An uninitiated person who learned the ritual workings of any given rites by reading them would not really be initiated, because the spiritual influence obtained from experiencing those rites would not have been transmitted to him. Because the Masonic secret is of such a nature that words cannot explain it, initiatic teaching can only use rites and symbols that suggest rather than express. The Masonic, or initiatic, secret can, therefore, be equated with the true spiritual center, the virgin point of the heart. The interior work of the individual, using the symbols as base and support, will allow each initiate to attain that secret and penetrate it more or less completely, more or less profoundly, according to the measure of the possibilities of his comprehension and realization.

In light of this, symbolism became the primary teaching tool of Freemasonry in a manner consistent with the initiatic tradition. Symbolism, in its most basic sense, means using one thing to represent another. Words, signs and gestures are all forms of symbols. Freemasons, however, study symbolism in a deeper sense. The term symbolism is derived from the Greek *symbolon*, which was a token of identity verified by comparing its other half. In this sense, symbols are the representation or affirmation of a concept or truth by reason of relationship or unity of parts. The meaning represented by a symbol is greater than the whole of its parts. Freemasons are concerned with this aspect of symbolism—the gathering of what is scattered—as a means of better understanding the whole of existence. By gathering knowledge from the spiritual traditions of the world and uniting individuals who otherwise would have stood apart, Freemasonry itself serves as a symbol of centrality and truth. Symbols, when properly perceived by the knowing initiate, reflect the hidden relationship between the material and spiritual world and thereby reveal the reality of a higher order.

Therefore symbolism is the unique language of initiation, guiding us ever inward toward the center, that virgin point, the source of light and eye of the divine. For the man able to achieve the end result of initiation in attaining the Masonic Secret and re-discovering his true center, it could be said that he no longer belongs to the world, but on contrary it belongs to him.

To conclude, it may be appropriate to quote Black Elk, a Medicine Man of the Sioux, who provides us with the following summary:

“I am blind and do not see the things of this world; but when the Light comes from Above, it enlightens my heart and I can see, for the Eye of my heart sees everything. The heart is a sanctuary at the center of which there is a little space, wherein the Great Spirit dwells, and this is the Eye. This is the Eye of the Great Spirit by which He sees all things and through which we see Him. If the heart is not pure, the Great Spirit cannot be seen, and if you should die in this ignorance, your soul cannot return immediately to the Great Spirit, but it must be purified by wandering about in the world. In order to know the center of the heart where the Great Spirit dwells you must be pure and good, and live in the manner that the Great Spirit has taught us. The man who is thus pure contains the Universe in the pocket of his heart.”

¹ David Stevenson, *The First Freemasons: Scotland's Early Lodges and Their Members* (Geo Stewart & Co. 2001) p. 3

² Seyed Hossein Nasr, “The Heart of the Faithful is the Throne of the All-Merciful” in *Paths to the Heart: Sufism and the Christian East*, ed. James S. Cutsinger, (World Wisdom, 2002) pp. 32-33

³ *Ibid.*, p. 33

⁴ Kallistos Ware, “How Do We Enter the Heart?” in *Paths to the Heart: Sufism and the Christian East*, ed. James S. Cutsinger, (World Wisdom, 2002) p. 8

⁵ *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Thomas Merton (Doubleday: New York, 1996) p. 142

⁶ Griffith, Sidney H., “Merton, Massignon, and the Challenge of Islam” in *Merton and Sufism: The Untold Story: A Complete Compendium*, ed. Rob Baker and Gray Henry (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 1999) pp. 63-64

⁷ Ware p. 4

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ René Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols* (Quinta Essentia) p. 145

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 283

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 294-295