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Freemasonry or freemasonries? Towards universalism.

Since 1877, when the Grand Orient of France gave up the reference to « the immortality of the soul » and claimed liberty of conscience for all its members, thus incurring the wrath of the United Grand Lodge of England, world freemasonry has been divided between the so called « regular » freemasonry and « irregular » freemasonry ». While British and American Grand Lodges oppose “regular” to irregular”, the French use the concepts of “liberal” and “dogmatic”. In the eighteenth century the word “regular” referred simply to the regularity of the charter granted to each lodge and meant that the lodge abided by the regulations of the Grand Lodge whose jurisdiction it belonged to. Only at the end of the nineteenth century did the concepts of “regularity” and “irregularity” become a matter of principles with ideological connotations. Because the United Grand Lodge of England was the Premier Grand Lodge, the first Grand Lodge in British history, it considered itself as the only legitimate authority to decide who was regular and who wasn’t. Similarly American Grand Lodges trusted Albert Mackey’s landmarks and consequently no Grand Lodge admitting women or refusing to mention explicitly the Grand Architect of the Universe in its Constitutions could be considered as regular. Moreover any Grand Lodge having official relationships with such a Grand Lodge was also considered as irregular even if it did mention the Grand Architect and refused to accept women. Probably in order to simplify diplomatic relationships the United Grand

Lodge of England decided to recognize one single Grand Lodge per country, just as for a long time a single American Grand Lodge was considered as regular in each American State according to the principle of exclusive jurisdiction.

I contend that the historical context informs the major differences between French/ Belgian (and liberal) freemasonry and British/American freemasonry and must be taken into account not only in order to avoid broad generalizations, stereotypes and prejudices but also to suggest possible evolutions.

Therefore I shall focus on the cultural and political backgrounds of French, English and American Grand Lodges, in order to account for the main differences, first the religious dimension and then the issues of gender and race

1 Religious issues

Eighteenth century lodges were very similar in their practices and goals. They emerged in the context of the Enlightenment and shared common values such as religious tolerance, the thirst for knowledge and sociability. Nothing in their Masonic ritual or practice seemed to separate them and it was very easy for Masons to travel from one continent to the other and to feel at home in the lodges they visited. Masonic certificates were provided and guaranteed that each visitor had been made a Mason in a regular manner. Broadly speaking this remained the case throughout the eighteenth century but shadows were cast on the picture as early as 1738.

The Masons were not responsible for this, the popes were...

While freemasons had been perceived as peaceful subjects in Britain, France and the early British and French colonies, all of a sudden they were suspected of fomenting rebellion and of being dangerous individuals, wily

“foxes” – the term was used who should be eradicated from the face of the earth. Indeed Pope Clement XII did not mince his words in the 1738 Bull called *In Eminenti*.

The reason for such an attitude was that the Catholics feared the development of Protestantism, all the more so as freemasonry was associated to Britain, ie France’s and Italy’s legendary foe. Pope Clement’s ban was reiterated in 1751 by Pope Benedict XIV (*Providas*) and all his successors.

Britain, Protestant states and the American colonies mainly ignored the Pope’s ban but Catholic countries were affected. Even if in some Catholic countries like France, local Parliaments refused to promulgate the Pope’s bull on their territories, there were some Catholic officials like Cardinal Fleury for instance who warned the Bordeaux authorities against the pernicious influence of philosopher Montesquieu because he was a member of the order... In Spain and Portugal the Inquisition was determined to fight all those who dared question its authority. Masons discovered the trial of John Coustos thanks to his autobiographical account published in Britain (London 1746) and describing the way he was tortured 1.

Thanks to the Popes, freemasons were considered as dangerous individuals in several European countries. No wonder Masons reacted against the dogmatism and intolerance of the Catholic church, especially in France where a great number of priests belonged to the lodges and felt at a loss. This paved the way for the secularism of late nineteenth century Masonry. In Britain and the American colonies on the contrary there was never any antagonism between the Established Church and the freemasons. British Masons and early American Masons attended the local churches to celebrate St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist and from 1775 onwards appointed a Grand Chaplain as one of their Grand Officers². Moreover in the thirteen colonies the new

1 John Coustos, *The Sufferings of John Coustos for freemasonry for his refusal to turn Roman Catholic in the Inquisition at Lisbon*, London, Strahan, 1746, 400p.

2 The first one was William Dodd. He was appointed before the inauguration of Freemasons’ Hall in London.

settlers whose ancestors had often suffered from religious persecution perceived freedom of worship as a fundamental liberty worth fighting for. No wonder they valued Anderson's *Constitutions* which clearly indicated that all denominations were accepted providing masons were not "stupid atheists". However, in France, Spain or Portugal where the Catholic Church and the notorious Inquisition ruled unchallenged, Freemasons significantly paid little attention to Anderson's *Constitutions* and never really considered religion as a potential source of liberty. Freemasons were not at variance with the philosophers of their countries: whereas reason and religion were perceived as perfectly compatible in John Locke's country they were considered as totally contradictory by Voltaire and several other freemasons. The Churches made the difference, not the Grand Lodges.

The rift between freemasonry in France, Belgium and other European countries on the one hand and British/American freemasonry on the other hand dates back to 1877, when the Grand Orient de France decided to replace "the belief in the immortality of the soul" with the concept of "freedom of conscience". The freemasons felt the need to differentiate themselves from the Catholic Church and to insist on religious tolerance. Political reasons were also grafted on the religious ones. (The British freemasons who were closely linked to the Establishment, resented the fact that so many Masons had sided with the Paris Commune in 1871, a popular insurrection against Napoleon III after the Emperor had compromised with the Prussian army. In Louisiana the Grand Lodge resented the French attempts to create lodges under the aegis of the Grand Orient, an attitude which was considered as an infringement upon the principle of exclusive jurisdiction).

When the Grand Orient of France made this significant move, the UGLE and in its wake all American Grand Lodges withdrew their recognition. Had the Masonic officers of the time been more conversant with the religious context of

each other's country, they might have avoided a major misunderstanding. Had British masons taken into account the hostility of the Catholic Church towards freemasons, they might have considered the French move as natural. Had the French Masons understood that the Church of England or the American Churches had never represented a threat against individual liberties, they might have made a special effort to explain their case better.

The Vatican renewed the ban against freemasons throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The latest edict against freemasons dates back to 1983, under the aegis of Cardinal Ratzinger (the preceding Pope, Benedict XVI) and is still enforced. Masons are still barred from the Holy Communion although the ban has been lifted concerning religious funerals. No wonder French freemasons (but also Belgian ones and several Masons in Latin America) insist on keeping the liberty of conscience as a vital principle and refuse to impose a religious belief to their members.

2 Gender issues

Anderson's *Constitutions* excluded women from Masonic lodges. Since the French never really paid attention to them in the eighteenth century, they did not consider this exclusion as binding. Moreover the condition of French women was slightly better than in Britain. Whereas sociability had been limited to men, thanks to the existence of the numerous clubs in early eighteenth century Britain and throughout the century, aristocratic women were allowed to enter the public sphere in France thanks to the salons (Me D'Helvetius, Me Geoffrin, Me Genlis or Me du Châtelet etc) . A significant minority of women had access to the culture of the Enlightenment in France, contrary to England where so many women wrote novels and essays anonymously. No wonder lodges of adoption soon emerged and were considered as perfectly natural. As Margaret Jacob

showed, the first recognized adoption lodge was founded in the Hague, in the Netherlands (Lodge de Juste, around 1751) but also, as she found out very recently thanks to the Russian archives, probably in Bordeaux as early as the 1730s. Lodges of adoption were officially recognized as part of the Grand Orient de France one year after its official foundation, in 1774.

They gained momentum throughout the eighteenth century. As all the other lodges they disappeared during the French revolution but were again active in the nineteenth century. At the beginning of the twentieth century they worked under the aegis of the Grande Loge de France until the latter decided in 1936 to grant them complete independence. The adoption lodges had no choice but to form a separate body, which was to become *L'Union Maçonnique Féminine de France* in 1945, later the GLFF (1952). The main characteristic of the French lodges of adoption was that women members worked under the authority of male Grand Lodges; side by side with men in specific lodges, but were considered as sisters, as full-fledged freemasons.

Rob Morris was aware of the existence of the French adoption lodges and was undoubtedly inspired by them when he created the Eastern Star in the 1850s. The only difference was that American Masons did not recognize women of the Eastern Star as freemasons. The model of the lodges of adoption never crossed the Channel between France and Britain. British women had to wait till the beginning of the twentieth century to become members of the Women Freemasons, at first a mixed order and then a female only order or to join the lodges of the Human Duty founded in London by Annie Besant.

The context was therefore completely different in France, Britain and the United States. Besides, the admission of women among French Masons was never explicitly banned in Masonic Constitutions as in Anderson's Constitutions or Mackey's landmarks. There was a slight difference between saying that only

men could be admitted and saying that “no slave or woman” could ever become Masons as Mackey’s landmarks kept repeating.

Not all French Masons in the twentieth century considered that women had their place in traditionally male Grand Lodges. Yet there were precedents in the history of French freemasonry with the lodges of adoption. Mixed freemasonry and then the specific female Grand Lodge were respected and recognized by all the French Grand Lodges (except by the GLNF, the only “regular” GL according to the UGLE³) from the outset. Although members of the GLDF were allowed to visit the mixed and women only lodges, they did not accept women visitors. Inside the Grand Orient de France women were only accepted as visitors in the late 1970s. The GODF has now decided to recruit members without any consideration of gender. Today the GODF claims 2000 sisters (out of 50 000 members) and 400 out of 1200 lodges have a mixed membership.

Since women were considered as sisters as early as the eighteenth century in France, no one ever thought of banning them from freemasonry altogether. Evolutions are slow but continuous in French freemasonry.

In the United States only women in mixed orders such as the Human Duty or in the foreign GLFF and GLFB consider themselves as freemasons, since Eastern Star Women have never claimed to be freemasons. American women have still a long way to go, even more so than English women who belong to the Order of Women Freemasons and claim to be Masons. The present conference organized by the Roosevelt Center with the support of the Grand Lodge of California proves that there is a growing concern for gender issues.

³ The UGLE recently withdrew its recognition of the GLNF but is probably going to recognize the GLNF again soon.

3 Evolutions in terms of race

If we now turn to the issues of race, indeed the historical context also informs the debate.

Thanks to Abbé Grégoire and Robespierre, the French were ahead in terms of the abolition of slavery. Although the French revolution tends to be remembered for its dark side only, the Terror, it was also responsible for the rights of man theory which stated that all men were equal. As early as 1794 slavery was abolished in Saint Domingue, a few years before the independence of Haiti. A number of former slaves became leading freemasons committed to the movement towards independence (there is still doubt about the membership of Toussaint Louverture, but several members of his family were alleged freemasons). Of course the French ban on slavery was shortlived as Napoleon restored the shameful practice in 1802, some say because of the nasty influence of his Creole wife Josephine... However there never was any official rejection of former slaves, of black people in French metropolitan lodges, even if of course planters' lodges in Martinique or Guadeloupe did not feel in tune. A leading French Mason, Victor Schoelcher, was responsible for the abolition of slavery in France, but this took place in 1848 only, fifteen years after the British abolition.

British Masons did not behave in the same way at home and in their colonies. The case of Oviton, a black trumpeter made a Mason in a lodge in Brighton and then rejected as a visitor in a planters' lodge in Barbados, Albion lodge, is significant. Yet, broadly speaking, Masons toed the line and engaged in the campaign for the abolition of slavery when the majority of the government did so. The Duke of Sussex, as Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of England, hosted the big meetings organized by the Abolition Society between 1807 and 1833.

While British and French abolitions had become effective by the middle of the nineteenth century, in America the general picture was completely different. Although Jefferson and Paine had committed themselves against slavery at a very early stage, the political divide between the Northern and the Southern States affected the lodges exactly in the same way. Because the issue was a burning one, no single Grand Lodge, not even in the North, officially recognized the first African Lodge, founded in 1784 by Prince Hall.

It was much easier to abolish slavery in France and Britain, as it was practiced in the distant colonies, than on American soil where the slaves actually worked in the southern plantations, at home. Similarly the Northern states which did not derive their economic revenue from slavery found it easier to fight the principle of slavery. There never was a civil war in France or Britain over the issue of slavery, contrary to America. For more than a century, American Grand Lodges just toed the line and declared Prince Hall Grand Lodges as clandestine. The celebrated Albert Pike, declared : “I took my obligations to white men, not Negroes. When I have to accept Negroes as brethren or leave Masonry I shall leave it”⁴. There were notable exceptions: the Grand Lodge of New Jersey allowed the Alpha Lodge to accept black members as early as 1873⁵. William Upton, the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Washington in 1898 recognized the African lodge as the first black lodge and condemned race prejudice. The Grand Lodge of Massachusetts took a similar stance in 1947. Yet the first official recognition of a Grand Lodge of Prince Hall by a white Grand Lodge took place in 1989 only with the Grand Lodge of Connecticut. Forty two of the fifty one Grand Lodges have now officially recognized Prince Hall freemasonry. The Grand Lodges of Texas (2007), North Carolina (2008) and Kentucky(2011) are the most recent ones. The nine Grand Lodges still refusing to recognize Prince Hall freemasonry are Alabama, Arkansas, South Carolina, Florida,

⁴ Albert Pike, quoted by Walkes, *A Prince Hall Masonic Quizbook*, p. 84

⁵ Donn A.Cass, *Negro Freemasonry and Segregation*, 1957, p. 70-90.

Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee and West Virginia. Paul Bessel has played a major role in publishing the list of Grand Lodges and tracing the most recent evolutions on his website.

Conclusion

The major differences between the British, American and French contexts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries largely inform the current divisions among freemasons in the world, according to whether they bear allegiance to the so called “liberal” ie “irregular” freemasonry or the so called English and American “regular freemasonry”. Yet significant evolutions have taken place lately and should be taken into account. For the last twenty years several Grand Lodges have encouraged research on the history of freemasonry and developed excellent libraries open to all scholars and the general public. The United Grand Lodge of England and several American libraries have recruited a professional staff and started digitalizing their resources.

International conferences such as the ICHF, sponsored by the Grand Lodge of Scotland and the Grand Lodge of Washington DC., Margaret Jacob’s research center, Freemasonry and Civil Society at UCLA and John Slifko’s and Maru Vasquez’ Roosevelt Center play a major role to promote Masonic research and liaise between Academia and the freemasons themselves.

The more the historical context is explored, and the better freemasons understand their differences. More openness on the part of the Grand Lodges and more scholarly research no doubt help bridge the gap between the so called “regular” and “irregular” freemasonry.

With time Grand Lodges in the world might be able to accept their differences, more particularly in terms of religion—as gender and race issues seem to be evolving at a faster pace- and stop considering one another as

“irregular”, a term which is anything but helpful as it precludes any mutual understanding, or “dogmatic” (as French Grand Lodges consider British and American lodges as they impose a religious belief to their members). Hopefully the religious tolerance which was the main characteristic of Masonic lodges during the Enlightenment might be on the agenda again and a secular approach could be encouraged: religious belief would thus be confined to the private sphere leaving each Mason free to believe or not to believe, providing he (or she) recognizes himself (or herself) in the moral tenets extolled by freemasonry.