

**Speech for the
European Conference of Grand Masters
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The wide range of topics addressed by this Conference of Grand Masters of the European Regular Grand Lodges incorporates discussion of the 'Ritual' intended as *self-development*. My talk will focus on this argument of considerable interest.

However, prior to examining the specific issue of Masonic rituals, we should first clarify what is meant by the term Freemasonry.

Indeed, on discussing topics relating to Freemasonry, the first, unavoidable obstacle to be faced is to agree with the discussant on a *shared* definition of Freemasonry. As history has imparted, it becomes immediately apparent that we are faced with a virtually insurmountable problem, as throughout its evolution the phenomenon of 'Freemasonry' has assumed such widely diverse forms, representations and contents according to the place of origin or to the historic-social context in which it subsequently developed, that the coining of a univocally shared definition would be at the very least arbitrary and misleading, but moreover would not portray the true situation.

Of course, the numerous Masonic entities, in particular the 'regular' associations, all share common 'principles' based on a respect of what we refer to as the 'Ancient

Landmarks’, although a series of differences and interpretations remain. In my modest opinion, these Conferences should focus on raising awareness internally (but also to the outside world with a keen interest in the topic) of our *differences* and thus allow us to appreciate to a greater degree the points of reciprocal interest.

Personally, although naturally I cannot say whether this opinion is shared by all brethren in my Grand Lodge, I deem the portrayal of Freemasonry as a mere Association having predominantly ‘social’ or ‘charitable’ aims as somewhat diminutive. In my view, Freemasonry constitutes a remarkable ‘personal’ experience, i.e. a possibility for a “conscious’ development of one’s innermost nature. In my own personal opinion therefore, rather than concentrating on a ‘*social*’ and exclusively ‘*moral*’ analysis, I lean more towards a predominant and inherently ‘*existential*’ dimension of the Masonic journey.

Historians have widely debated on the singularities of Freemasonry, but the most intense ongoing diatribe relates to the ‘Origins’ of Freemasonry. This discussion offsets one school of thought viewing modern ‘speculative’ Freemasonry as a *direct* descendent of the medieval Guilds, against another group of scholars who, on the contrary, deem Freemasonry to be a phenomenon created *ex novo* towards the mid-Seventeenth century. The main representative of the theory of a ‘direct’ descent of Freemasonry with no degree of continuity from the medieval Cathedral

builders is, without doubt, the scholar Henry Carr, one of the best renowned and accredited English scholars in the field of Masonic studies. Carr upheld the feasibility of this theory, known as 'The Transition Theory', thanks to a series of events and documents (the oldest of which dating back to 1356), which, over a period of *600 years*, is purported to have demonstrated the descent of modern-day Freemasonry from the medieval Guilds. One of the best-known disputants of this theory is John Hamill, an English historian who served as *Librarian and Curator* of UGLE. In an attempt to prove the descent of the 'speculative' Freemasonry from the previously 'operative' form via a period of transition, Hamill affirmed that numerous historians had gathered, frequently in a completely arbitrary manner, fragments of information originating from many parts of the British Isles, which, he opined, contained little more than mere leaps of faith. To avoid a lengthy digression into the field of Masonic studies, Hamill proposed a *differentiation* between what he defined the *Authentic or Scientific School*, based on irreproachable documents and consequential conclusions, and the *Non-Authentic School*; he moreover underlined how, on examining the English papers relating to the origins of Freemasonry, the former, the *Authentic School*, has been unable to date to produce any evidence of the existence of 'operative' Lodges. According to Hamill therefore, the 'Accepted' Masons (there is some doubt as to whether it would have been correct to call them "Speculative' in the seventeenth century), seem to have first made an

appearance in England as a *new* organization, having no previous association with an ‘operative’ Craft, an organization that had seen the light in the context of the *London Mason Company* by means of a new and fundamental phenomenon known as ‘Acceptance’. I am fully in accordance with Hamill’s theory.

In the same way as the ‘Origins’, the Masonic rituals have also been associated with a degree of complexity. I would like first to highlight how, as proposed by this Conference, the definition of the Ritual as a tool for *self-development* constitutes an important starting point in achieving a correct definition of the Masonic pathway, no longer *subdued* into a mere, diminutive, purely *moralistic* view of the same. To achieve this aim, it is clear that the complex symbolism present in the Ritual will need to be addressed by means of an *insightful* approach. Indeed, in the Masonic Ritual, the use of a symbolic language conveys an interaction, rejected from Descartes onwards, between *the matter* and *the spirit*; it is indeed an ‘*esoteric language*’, at variance with rationalist and scientific language, as it is conveyed using *images* aimed at generating knowledge by means of “*intuition*” rather than by a process of logic. It is indeed through an “*intuitive knowledge*” that the Masonic pathway, making use of a ritual symbolism, strives to fulfil an *active process* of inner transformation, an overt ‘change of status’, a *self-development*. It is fundamental that, should this change occur, it remains entirely *personal*, by no means *social*, with the main aim

of the Freemason focusing on being reunited with his own 'supreme principle', free from all material constraints ("metals"), and achieving an event that to all effects is a *spiritual realization*, an '*inner transformation*'.

If everyday language fails to convey the essential aspect of a *transcendent* experience, this is likely due to the structure of common language being based on a subject-object opposition, thus viewing, for example, the dynamics of Self and God as *separate* entities, although it would encounter difficulty if called upon to convey the initiatic experience of a profound Self-God *union*, in which the I is no longer the small psychological self, centre of a specific desire, and God is no longer the supreme, the '*Other*' Supreme Being.

In the light of these premises, Freemasonry therefore represents a truly 'symbolic experience', particularly as, in the same way as in Mystics, the language used implies a recognition of sensitive metaphors such as *touch*, *vision*, *light*, and *sound*, all actions suggestive of a corporeal rather than an intellectual experience, although the two are indeed inseparable, as a corporeal experience can only be communicated through an intermediary.

The tool used by the Ritual to tap into and impart knowledge of the superior Truths is indeed Symbolism, which is rejected or ignored by the modern spirit for whom the Truths belong solely to the order of pure intellectualism. Given that modern language represents an analytical and discursive form of communication, it

follows that human reasoning serves as a tool to convey significance of the former; however, on the contrary, 'symbolism' is, by virtue of its very nature, essentially *synthetic*, and for this reason, *intuitive*, and is thus better suited than a logic-verbal language to act as a vehicle for 'knowledge through intuition'. Being *synthetic*, the 'symbolism' used in Masonic Rituals opens up to the possibility of an unlimited wealth of concepts, being eminently superior to the use of verbal language, characterized by precise, well-defined meanings that imply an equally restrictive interpretation. In the Masonic Ritual therefore, symbols are employed as an important method of initiatic teaching, a true cognitive tool to be applied to ascertain the most profound truths. Consequently, as we will see further on, by modifying the symbols and allegories used, inevitably the messages conveyed within the rituals will vary.

A series of historic documents indicate how the contents of the Ritual, i.e. the symbolism and allegory adopted, may differ considerably. On reading the first English and Scottish Rituals (*The Edinburgh Register House manuscript* dated 1696, *the Chetwode Crawley manuscript* 1700 circa, *the Kevan manuscript* 1714 -20, *Dumfries n°4* dated 1710 and a series of other coeval catechisms), their deep-rooted *Christian* components are clearly evident, an element which, however, over time, and long before introduction of the 'Emulation' Ritual (1816) (erroneously defined by the *Lodge of Reconciliation* as the Ritual which de-Christianised the English Freemasonry), disappeared. Indeed, in the

renowned work *Illustration of Masonry* by William Preston (1772), these overtly 'Christian' elements were no longer present, on the contrary Preston, in the first magnificent pages of his work, pantheistically focussed his attention on one 'Nature'.

Moreover, a comparison of the 'Christian' rituals from Scandinavian Obediences, or even some of the rituals adopted in the three historic Obediences of England, Ireland and Scotland, reveals the use of quotes from biblical readings, beseechments, elements that in several rituals, even those used in 'regular' Obediences', are not present. As a mere example, in the 'Emulation' Ritual, the concept of God is mentioned numerous times using the terms "*Omnipotent Father*", "*Supreme Governor of the Universe*", "*Creator*", "*Lord*", "*Grand Geometrician of the Universe*", "*Omnipotent God*", "*Most High*", "*Architect and Regulator of the Universe*", "*Lord of Life*", "*eternal*", "*Heavenly Father*" and "*Author of Light and life*", "*Omniscient, Omnipresent and Omnipotent*", "*Perfect God*", and, of course, "*Great Architect of the Universe*", in other Rituals the latter definition alone (*Great Architect of the Universe*) is used, whilst the name of 'God' is never mentioned.

The oldest French Grand Lodge, the *Grand Orient of France* which, up until 1877 (date in which all reference to the *Great Architect of the Universe* was removed) was considered a 'Regular' Grand Lodge', and the Rituals, as a result of the historical setting they sprung from, contain clear reference to a typically Illuminist philosophy: "*The Flame is the symbol of reason*", "*The*

Blazing Star leads us towards Progress”, and the Ritual is seasoned by the triptych “*Liberte’, Equalite’, Fraternite’*”, in a clearly political and social intent; no Prayers, Beseechments or Biblical readings are present.

As a last example, in 1980 the *German Episcopal Conference* issued a paper as the result of the work of a Commission investigating, from 1974 to 1980, in conjunction with the *United Grand Lodge of Germany*, the ‘compatibility’ between believing in the Catholic faith and belonging to a Masonic Obedience. After six years of studies and confrontation with the German Freemasons, the Commission concluded that there was an irreconcilable *incompatibility* due to the ‘relativist’ components of the Masonic rituality. But how did the German bishops reach this conclusion?

In all truth, and here is the paradox, it was the same *United Grand Lodge of Germany* who, most imprudently and clumsily, gave the Commission a strong justification on which to base their decision. Indeed, amongst the documents supplied to the Bishops of the Episcopal Conference, in addition to the Ritual of their first ‘Three Degrees’, the German Freemasons also included a paper that expanded on and explained the latter in detail, the *International Lexicon of Freemasonry* (1932), in which the authors, Lennhoff, Posner and Binder defined the rituality of Freemasonry using the term ‘*relativist*’.

The consequences were devastating for Freemasonry, as the document issued by the *German Episcopal Conference* proved fundamental in the compiling of a subsequent document, the ‘*Declaration on Masonic*

Associations – Quaesitum Est, published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on November 26th 1983, by the then Cardinal Ratzinger. This document underlines how ‘relativism’ is the major source of incompatibility in the case of a member of the Catholic faith belonging to a Masonic Association, reaching the subsequent conclusion that a Catholic who joins a Masonic Association lives in a state of ‘grave sin’ and may not be permitted to take Communion. The Catholic Church would probably have confirmed nevertheless the same negative opinions of Freemasonry that it had held for almost 300 years, but the carelessness of the German Freemasons with regard to the presence of ‘relativism’ (totally inexistent, incidentally) in Masonic rituals could have been avoided.

A Masonic Ritual, of whatever form, could never be ‘relativist’ due to the very nature of Freemasonry itself. For example, the English ritual of *Emulation* refers to God as having the attributes of *personality* and uniqueness (“*Being*”), originality, omnipotence (“*Supreme*”) and transcendence (“*Celestial*”), using similar terms in the immanent domain, both at the origin (“*Creator*”, “*Architect*”, “*Regulator*”) historically (“*Governor*”, “*Lord*”, “*Revelation*” and “*Providence*”), and from a soteriological point of view (“*he shall reward or he shall punish*”), underlining how this ritual is based on a clearly *theist*, and certainly not relativist, vision.

Moreover, a belief in ‘God’ is the acknowledged *condicio sine qua non* to adhere to Freemasonry, based on the

premise of an innate predisposition of man to the sacred, whilst remaining in the context of the principle of tolerance that a Freemason displays towards all beliefs.

To return to the purpose of the Ritual, the latter is intended to convey how the scope and ultimate aim of Freemasonry is above all the perfecting of man, a pathway towards the ascent of self, in which each individual or collective being tends, either consciously or unconsciously, to establish himself by applying the force of his own specific nature. It is at the very point of his evolution in which the being becomes consciously aware of the true aim that the pathway to initiation commences; once he has become aware of himself, his conscience must lead him on his *personal* journey towards the full achievement of consciousness that terminates with the complete, harmonious and hierarchical development of all possibilities that are virtually implicated in the very essence of this being.

It could however be objected that, if the pathway is 'individual', and if the 'secret' to be disclosed is purely internal and 'personal', varying according to the nature of the individual seeking the same, why is it necessary to meet as 'Brethren' in the same context? Theoretically, could we not achieve the same result through 'gnosis', a pathway of knowledge, based on the principles that the Rituals imparts whilst lacking any interaction with other subjects, and thus in the absence of a Masonic 'initiation'? The reply to this question is: 'No', it would

be impossible to achieve the same result, to complete one's *self-development*, for a series of important reasons. First and foremost, it should be emphasized how one of the founding values of Freemasonry is the concept of '*Brotherhood*'. To comprehend the meaning of the term *Brotherhood* from an 'Initiatic' point of view, and distance ourselves from the frequently nauseating and trivializing definitions applied in everyday language, I sought inspiration from a fundamental locution gleaned from the doctrine of the philosopher Marsilio Ficino, founder of the *Platonic Academy* in Florence: the concept of 'Platonic Love'.

Marsilio Ficino defined "Platonic Love" as a *spiritual* bond between persons fully committed to a *life of contemplation*, an experience we might define as the 'initiatic' fruit of a natural commonality (between 'similar people') and a friendship between people aspiring towards the same ideal. This love between people of a kind, known as 'Brethren', is the cornerstone on which Freemasonry is based, a sentiment as intended by Ficino, and as it is construed also in Freemasonry, described as an intellectual love between friends, a love that unites the members of an Initiatic Order in a 'Community'. Consequently, the love shown to another individual, the "friendship", in our case the '*Brotherhood*' displayed within a 'Community' of true 'Initiates', acts as a prelude and is preparatory to the love for God, the true aim of human desire.

Why is the presence of and belief in God essential in Freemasonry? Indeed, because the singular form of

friendship, the '*Brotherhood*' inspired by the Masonic rituality invariably involves at least *three* persons: two friends and God, the latter representing an inescapable and fundamental part of the relationship, a relationship displayed not only in the form of sentiment, but also as the '*sharing of spiritual intents*', by no means casual therefore, but founded on the essential spirit of mankind, deriving from the aspiration towards an 'inner achievement' that stems from the love of God expressed by each individual.

It should also be borne in mind that the concept of 'love' as proposed by the *Christian-Platonist* Ficino, in addition to the concept of *friendship*, also comprises a second concept, likewise of fundamental importance in the Masonic initiatic journey, the concept of Charity.

Charity is the *religious* sentiment that embraces God's cause, and wherein all men are viewed as 'Brothers'; it is manifested in the diligent assistance of others. Charity is one of the general commandments listed in the Bible, but was then transformed by Paul the Apostle into a full-blown concept which subsequently became part of the theology of the Church. Ficino undoubtedly identified this 'Charity' with his 'love', and alternated in the use of both terms, often preferring to use the term 'Charity'. Charity is indeed one of the three Theological Virtues (in the ritual referred to as Moral Virtues) on which Freemasonry is based in the '*Emulation*' Ritual.

However, sad to say, frequently 'Charity' is interpreted and practiced in a somewhat questionable manner that is far removed from the purpose for which it was

initially comprised among the ‘founding’ factors of Freemasonry. All too often the humanitarian spirit, the so-called ‘goodwill’ with which numerous Masonic Obediences *publicize* their charitable activities, fruit of a distorted set of purely Kantian and Christian morals, results in what is often referred to in slang as ‘selfish charity’, a term first coined by Manzoni¹, or, worse still, in a charitable action carried out for sheer *narcissistic* reasons, i.e. the charitable action is performed for self-gratification.

To pick up the initial thread once more, there is a second important reason that underpins the need for the ‘Brethren’ to congregate, and this is to meet other men who hold a similar ‘view of the world’ and have common interests.

Recent studies conducted in the field of cognitive sociology have highlighted how the main instrument that distinguishes man from other animal species, i.e. ‘reason’, a tool that guides men in their search for knowledge and directs them towards the most appropriate decisions, contrary to affirmations unfailingly maintained by philosophers to date, is frequently a dismal failure. What is the reason behind this? For centuries we have been convinced that our sense of reason helps us to make the best decisions, but

¹ Alessandro Manzoni in Chapter XVIII of the ‘Betrothed’ makes Count Attilio utter the following words on talking to his uncle in an attempt to get Friar Christopher sent away: “He protects, directs, what do I know? A peasant girl down there; and he dedicates a certain charity to this creature, a charity that isnot exactly selfish, but extremely jealous, suspicious and ornery”. This figure of speech likely developed during the 1800s. Pianigiani states: “The term Selfish charity is used to when an action intended for one’s own gain is conducted under the guise of charity”.

it seems as though this may not be the case: “Reason is flawed, but how badly? How should success or failure in reasoning be assessed? What are the mechanisms responsible? In spite of their often bitter disagreements, parties to these polemics have failed to question a basic dogma. All have taken for granted that the job of reasoning is to help individuals achieve greater knowledge and make better decisions”².

Many modern-day psychologists maintain how, in the presence of our intuitions or erroneous evaluations, our sense of reason frequently conjures up a series of debatable premises with the aim of confirming these evaluations, although they may at times be incorrect. The experts have defined these dynamics as a “Confirmation Bias” or “Myside Bias”, essentially a tendency to seek reasons that confirm our convictions instead of impartially analysing the latter and taking into account the possibility of their falsity or deceptiveness. As a result, our sense of reason tends unerringly to *confirm* what we already believe, thereby adding further impetus to our inner certainties, even when these are blatantly wrong.

The scholars Hugo Mercier³ and Dan Sperber⁴ in their recently published book ‘*The Enigma of Reason*’, maintain, on the basis of previous studies undertaken by other experts in the field, that contrary to what has

² Hugo Mercier-Dan Sperber, *The Enigma of Reason*, Allen Lane, Great Britain, 2017, page 4.

³ Hugo Mercier is a Researcher at the French National Centre for Scientific Research and works in the Cognitive Science Institute Marc Jeannerod in Lyon.

⁴ Dan Sperber is a Researcher in the Department of Cognitive Science and of Philosophy at the Central European University in Budapest and in the Institute Jean Nico of the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris.

been upheld to date, our ability to rationalize did not evolve to enable us to reach the most appropriate decisions, but rather for predominantly ‘social’ reasons: *“We will show how reason fits in individual minds, in social interactions, and in human evolution. To do so, we challenge the tradition, reject the dogma, and rethink both the mechanisms of reason and its function...we are less interested in debunking shaky ideas than in developing a new scientific understanding of reason, one that solves the double enigma. Reason, we will show, far from being a strange cognitive add-on, a superpower gifted to human by some improbable quirk, fits quite naturally among other human cognitive capacities and, despite apparent evidence to the contrary, is well adapted to its true function”*⁵.

As humans have a more intense and complex social life than any other species, the effective management of one’s social life is associated with an increased possibility of influencing others and of being influenced in turn, or, conversely, of resisting the influence of others; as a consequence, the two scholars affirm that reason has evolved with the aim of producing justifications and arguments created for the specific purpose of influencing others and, prior to accepting or refusing an argument, allowing us to assess the justifications and arguments put forward by others in an attempt to influence us.

To interpret reason as a tool intended for use in the promotion of social interaction enables us to better

⁵ Hugo Mercier-Dan Sperber, op. cit, pages 4-5.

comprehend a series of apparent anomalies displayed by reason itself, particularly the tendency towards *polarization*: when reason produces justifications and arguments to convince others, this forms part of a specific functional activity that results in the development of a natural bias.

The two authors maintain that the comparative dichotomy between reason and intuition should be rejected, underlining how reason itself represents no other than a 'form' of intuition, or rather, that logic only *subsequently* takes over from a previous 'intuitive' process: "*Much recent thinking about thinking (for instance Daniel Kahnemans's famous Thinking, Fast and Slow) revolves around a contrast between intuition and reasoning as if these were two quite different forms of inference. We will maintain, on the contrary, that reasoning is itself a kind of intuitive inference...Whereas reason is commonly viewed as the use of logic, or at least some system of rules to expand and improve our knowledge and our decision, we argue that reason is much more opportunistic and eclectic and is not bound to formal norms. The main role of logic in reasoning, we suggest, may well be a rhetorical one: logic simplify and schematize intuitive arguments, highlighting and often exaggerating their force*".⁶.

The fundamental part of the study conducted by Mercier and Sperber is the emphasis on how reason evaluates all arguments and justifications put forward by others; in this way reason becomes more objective and rigorous,

⁶ Hugo Mercier-Dan Sperber, op. cit, page 7.

seeking, to then in turn apply, solid rational bases with which to reject the arguments put forward, and particularly, to allow us to acknowledge *our* mistakes and accordingly change our mistaken points of view: *“Whereas reason is commonly viewed as a superior means to think better on one’s own, we argue that it is mainly used in our interactions with others. We produce reason in order to justify our thoughts and action to others and to produce arguments to convince others to think and act as we suggest. We also use reason to evaluate not so much our own thoughts as the reasons others produce to justify themselves or to convince us...When we listen to other, what we want is honest information. When we speak to the other, it is often our interest to mislead them, not necessarily through straightforward lies but by at least distorting, omitting, or exaggerating information so as to better influence them in their opinion and in their actions. When we listen to the other, then, we should trust wisely and sometimes distrust. When we talk to the others, we often have to overcome their understandable lack of trust...Reasons produce reasons that communicators use as arguments to persuade a reticent audience. Reason, by the same token, helps a cautious audience evaluate these reasons, accept good arguments, and reject bad ones.”*⁷.

A large number of studies in the field of contemporary psychology demonstrate how we are considerably more objective when evaluating arguments put forward by

⁷ Hugo Mercier-Dan Sperber, op. cit, pages 7-9.

others than when assessing our own. Thus, the dynamic of *comparison* with others helps us to acknowledge our ability to skew our means of reasoning and reach erroneous and inappropriate decisions, emphasising how, by accepting the accuracy of the reasoning of others, we will then be in a position to modify and correct our own. Confrontation with others, even when the original points of view are radically divergent, may promote a convergence towards increased *awareness* and, particularly, more balanced solutions. To debate openly with others is an excellent means of perfecting one's way of thinking and achieving self-improvement; conversely, if we persist in reasoning alone we will merely achieve a predictable confirmation of what we deem to be right, thereby strengthening our own convictions, whether these be right or wrong. To this regard, Mercier and Sperber wrote: "*We do not deny that reason can bring huge intellectual benefits, as the case of science well illustrated; on the contrary we explain how it does this: through interaction with others*".

The two scholars conclude by affirming that their hypotheses relating to the mediocrity of a solitary performance versus the solidity of a group result, has been historically confirmed by the examples provided by the modern academies, 'primitive' societies, modern scientific laboratories, and, I personally would like to add to these categories the 'Initiatic Schools', of which Freemasonry is the latest modern-day representation.

