

Freemasonry in France
(DRAFT not to be quoted)
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Introduction

Any study of the history of Freemasonry in France raises the most profound questions regarding our beliefs, our practices and our administration. This paper attempts to summarize the actual position in France and the reasons why it evolved. The paper concludes with my personal opinion on what position we should take.

A much more thorough examination of this whole question is contained in a paper by Rt Wor Bro Juan Alvarez¹.

Historical Beginning

It is generally believed that Freemasonry in France came from Scotland and that two Lodges existed in France as early as 1535, in Paris and Lyon². English Lodges were first established from 1721 but the first French-style Lodge was established in 1725, whose Grand Masters were all Scottish exiles who fled with the deposed King James II. Jacobite politics no doubt influenced its relationship with GLE and French Freemasonry apparently ignored the “Ancients” and “Moderns” dichotomy in England in the 18th Century.

The Problem

However, Freemasonry in France today is dispersed between many Grand Lodges as indicated in table 1³.

Table 1 - The Diversity of French Freemasonry

Name	Founded	Members	Lodges
Grand Orient de France	1738	43,000	1,000
Grande Loge Nationale Francaise	1913	30,000	1,250
Grand Loge de France	1894	26,000	670
10 others	1881-2002	>38,500	>990

We, together with the majority of Grand Lodges around the world, are not in harmony with the largest, the Grand Orient of France. We are in harmony with the National Grand Lodge of France, whose Lodges may work any one of five different rites.

Origins and Similarities

The Grand Orient has, in Masonic parlance, a “regular” beginning. It was founded in 1777 on the dissolution of the first French Grand Lodge and was “recognized” for the first 100 years of its existence. It changed its rules in 1777 and the following year the Grand Lodge of England withdrew recognition.

There is no thought that members of the Grand Orient do not live their lives according to the moral teachings of Freemasonry.

¹ Juan Carlos Alvarez, “A commentary on the Grand Orient of France”, Research Lodge of NSW, 1986

² Reference to “*Les Annales Maconniques de Pays-Bas*” written in 1922 in J S Walshe.

³ J S Walshe, “*Freemasonry in France*”, Metropolitan College Study Group, Oct 2002

Basic differences

There are three basic differences between the practices of the Grand Orient and “recognized” Freemasonry as follows:-

- Admission of atheists
- Omission of the Volume of the Sacred Law (VSL) from the ritual ceremonies
- Admission of females

Atheists - The Grand Orient has explained that admission of atheists into their order recognizes the need to allow total freedom of thought, unrestricted by dogma. This by no means infers that all members of the Grand Orient are atheists.

VSL - The Grand Orient of France banished the VSL, from its Lodges and deleted all reference to TGAOTU from its ceremonies, maintaining that "the basis of Freemasonry is absolute liberty of conscience and the solidarity of humanity"⁴.

Females – The Grand Orient recognizes orders admitting females into Masonry.

There are other differences including the abolition of the office of Grand Master but the main issues are the ones mentioned above.

Cultural Issues in France

In order to understand how Freemasonry in France has taken this path, it is really necessary to look at some basic cultural differences between our traditional anglophile view of life and some issues in life in France. This really falls into three different but intertwined areas as follows:-

- Egalitarianism and respect for Royalty
- The Law
- Politics and Religion

Divided loyalty between the French Royal family and the heroes of the revolution has never been completely eliminated from the French national psyche – perhaps because of the savagery of the guillotine. Perhaps because some families still farm lands they worked in feudal times and remember their patrons in family history. Perhaps this is simply because of France’s long history and the fact that remnants of their Royal heritage exist in every Province and City.

Descendants of France’s royalty still claim to be the legitimate monarch of France. These groups are descendants of the Bourbons, rejecting all heads of state since 1830, descendants of Louis-Phillippe, rejecting all heads of state since 1848 and descendants of Napoleon I and his brothers, rejecting all heads of state since 1870⁵.

⁴ Jean Baylot, "A Vindication of French Regular Masonry"

⁵ From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia



Louis XIX (1830)



Louis-Phillippe (1830-1848)



Napoleon III (1852-1870)

In the United States of America, where similar divided loyalties existed at a similar time, they have been resolved and play a negligible part in the national culture if at all. However, they do not have many of these daily reminders of the past. We in Australia have no long and revolutionary history and no feudal past so it may be difficult for us to understand the long historical view that people take of themselves in many European and Middle East countries.

Juan Alvarez takes the view that, as only nobility were permitted to wear swords, the higher Masonic degrees, where members were knighted, were very popular in France despite the egalitarian nature of Freemasonry. If so, this vividly illustrates the above dichotomy in cultural values.

Daily life in France is governed by a much larger number of laws than we are used to. The natural consequence of this is that people have less respect for, and pay less obedience to, the myriad of laws. When affairs become too detailed, it is natural to shy away from the detail and look for the principles instead. Some laws may seem unnecessary or even irritating to us but we tend to obey them anyway. The French are more philosophical about that. However, I recall a conversation about the negotiations about wine names between Australia and France, when they focused on the laws regarding what could be said on a wine bottle label – even the size of the lettering. Laws governing this are very detailed in France and this was seen as a primary instrument with which the attempt to restrict or protect their trade was to be implemented.

A basic tenet of law in France is that one is assumed guilty until proven innocent of a criminal charge and the laws of evidence are different.

In Australia, although we generally seek to separate the law and religion, we accept that politicians may have a ‘conscience vote’ or may speak about their religious convictions on a social issue. In France it is considered to be politically suicidal to invoke a religious attitude in a political debate because the principle of separating the Church from politics is far more ingrained in the national culture.

There have been 16 different French Popes but not one for over 600 years⁶. The French Kings were invariably more powerful than their Popes but needed their endorsement. Dissatisfaction with Rome has a long history and played a large part in

⁶ See Appendix A.

the revolution, but even Napoleon ordered the Pope to attend his coronation (but not to crown him).

Freemasons and the Pope

The first Papal Bull against Freemasonry, issued by Clement XII (1730-1740) stated that the main objection is to having the horrific penalties and the oath taken upon the bible. In propitiation, either the oath or the bible had to go. In 1877, when the Grand Orient made optional the presence of the VSL from their altars and removed any reference to TGAOTU from their rituals, the action was possibly due to these objections of the church.

But Rome still held the belief that the Craft was used as a medium to reach the republican cause because of its well developed central organisation able to provide the infrastructure for such a liberal movement.⁷

Feelings against the clergy were brought about by the aggressive attitude of the Churches towards the French Lodges. Masonry of the early times had been defensive in character. However others believed that the Grand Orient, by showing religious neutrality, maintained an attack on the Church.

The Vatican was well aware that the political clubs (and the French Freemasons by association) were advocating that one of the prerequisites of an effective democratic political system was the secularisation of society, or the exclusion of religious activities in government.⁸

Freemasons and the French Revolution

There is no question that freemasons, as individuals, were active in building, and rebuilding, a new society. In 1789 the established power in France was the King. However Louis XVI was a weak sovereign. The reality of power was the nobility, many of whose members now embraced the philosophers and rationalists, such as the Freemason Voltaire; the clergy, whose lower hierarchy understood the misery inflicted on the lower classes; the army, whose members were drawn from and often sympathetic to the lower classes; and the public service, whose members were drawn from an educated bourgeoisie who saw themselves locked out from much political and social advancement.⁹

The two anti-Masonic papal edicts, that of Pope Clemence XII on May 4, 1738 and that of Pope Benedict XIV on June 15, 1751, were never registered by the French Parliament and therefore never took effect. The clergy were well represented in Freemasonry, and the membership of some lodges, such as La Vertu in Clervaux, were composed entirely of Catholic clergymen. While the nobility were attracted to Freemasonry, the greater majority was made up of the bourgeoisie, to whom the Masonic motto of equality meant that they were the equal of the nobles.

Many of the army were freemasons. Bernadotte, who lead the troops expelled from Grenoble, and later was a general for Napoleon and then King of Sweden, was a Freemason. The cautious response of the army to the outbreak of rebellion in Britany has been ascribed to the number of officers who were Freemasons. While it is

⁷ Juan Carlos Alvarez, "A commentary on the Grand Orient of France", Research Lodge of NSW, 1986

⁸ Juan Carlos Alvarez, "A commentary on the Grand Orient of France", Research Lodge of NSW, 1986

⁹ "Freemasons in the French Revolution", Grand Lodge of British Columbia and Yukon A.F. & A.M.

doubtful, it is claimed by some that Napoleon was a Freemason.¹⁰ As were his brothers.



Napoleon I



Napoleon II

The rules for the Estates-General were developed by Minister Necker a probable Mason, while the election committees created by these rules are claimed to have been mainly composed of Freemasons.¹¹ Less admirable, Louis Philippe Joseph, 5th Duc d'Orleans from 1785, Grand Master of the Grand Orient and later "Citoyen Égalité" (1747/04/13 -1793/11/06), was driven by his hatred for his cousin the King. When the National Assembly was formed, out of the 1,336 delegates to the Estates-General at least 320, or 24%, are believed to have been freemasons.¹²

Gould states that “any evaluation of French Freemasonry must take into account the large number of bodies claiming authority to confer degrees and warrant lodges: there were ten such bodies active in the days preceding the French Revolution.”

Gould detailed over thirty bodies that existed between 1725 and 1885, noting that he only included those that exercised any considerable influence on the Grand Orient¹³. It is difficult to believe that there was any real organized and coordinated Masonic thrust during the revolution.

Some Administrative Matters

A necessary condition of “Recognition” is that a Grand Lodge is considered to be “regular” according to a set of rules. “Recognition” usually confers “Visitation Rights”, which enable members of each Grand Lodge, which are in recognition of each other, to visit Lodges in the other’s jurisdiction.

Despite this, there appears to be a wide-spread convention in France which allows members to visit Lodges in a jurisdiction which is not recognized by their Grand Lodge, although Grand Lodge officers will not do so “Officially”. This informality is not acceptable to many.

In Australia we generally operate in accordance with a policy of Exclusive Territorial Jurisdiction, by which Grand Lodges in one State agree not to erect Lodges in another State so as to provide each Grand Lodge exclusive jurisdiction over all Lodges in its

¹⁰ Napoleon allegedly Initiated: June 12-19 1798 (1795-98) in the Army Philadelphie Lodge, Malta

¹¹ See Appendix B for the sequence of events during the revolution.

¹² Juan Carlos Alvarez

¹³ R F Gould, “*The History of Freemasonry, Its Antiquities, Symbols, Constitutions, Customs, etc*”. Vol. III, New York, John C Yorston & Co., Publishers: 1886.

State. The major exception is in Western Australia where several Lodges hold allegiance to the United Grand Lodge of England. There are minor other exceptions.

The policy of exclusive territorial jurisdiction originated in the United States of America, where it is widely applied except in reference to the recognized Prince Hall Grand Lodges. The policy is not one of the “ancient landmarks” of Freemasonry and it is debateable whether its application is useful on balance. While it simplifies administration, it may well stifle innovation and diversity.

It does not apply in France but it means that we tend to make choices as to which we recognize in any area.

Masonic Colonialism

The early colonization by Britain and France of many areas in the world has marked the spread of Freemasonry. However, the mark of a wise colonist is to know when to grant independence so that the trade, laws, influence and institutions left behind by the colonizing powers survive. While, generally speaking, Britain has shown itself, by this definition, to be wise, nevertheless British Freemasonry still clings to old colonizing principles and has Lodges (English, Scottish and Irish) in parts of the world which have long since shed British rule. By this definition, France has not shown itself to be wise in Vietnam and other parts of Indo-china but still clings to colonies in the Pacific. French Freemasonry still holds Lodges in places such as Mauritius that it was forced to give up long ago.

This is in marked contrast to the early colonization by Spain and Portugal, which did not generally spread Freemasonry, but these nations have very clearly given up all colonization claims. Further, it could be said that Freemasonry spread with the anti-colonizing movements in South America. But the Grand Orient of France has caused considerable difficulties there too.

The problems caused by Masonic colonization have been seen in Australia in the Rose Croix, Templars and Constantine orders and in the Craft in Western Australia. The confusion caused by French Masonic colonization in Russia, for instance, although different in nature, was also significant. The recent initiatives taken by Grand Lodges in France to form the grand Lodge of Europe raise these questions again.

Masonic Practices

At least one of the customs in French Freemasonry could well be emulated in our procedures. Candidates are required to prepare papers on Freemasonry, setting out their understanding, before they can progress to the next degree. By all means let us study their customs and adopt those procedures of value that can advance our craft.

Conclusion

It is one thing to try to understand how French Freemasonry evolved into this dilemma. It is another matter to decide where it might lead us. I believe there is little doubt that most people would like to see a situation where there is full recognition and acceptance of each other as Masonic brothers.

Some people join Freemasonry for the social enjoyment, or for the opportunity it provides for community service, without seeking the philosophical and spiritual experience it also affords. To these people the issue is, at most, one of sorting out the

Masonic administrative conflicts before the Grand Orient could rejoin the international Masonic family.

However, for those who see Freemasonry as a spiritual journey as well as a social and charitable one, the Masonic situation in France confronts us with a basic decision, which, irrespective of the implications of Masonic administration, is of fundamental personal importance.

We must decide, as individuals, whether God is central to our lives or whether we accept that a total freedom of belief is more important than this and, in consequence, that belief in God is irrelevant to moral behaviour.

To Christians, this question is fundamental as Christians believe to be saved by faith in God. Our Muslim brethren will see this question differently but abhor any thought that it is acceptable not to believe in God. Similarly, our Jewish brethren could not excuse atheism in an applicant for Masonry. So it is, to me, impossible to accept the position of the Grand Orient where belief in God is not a basic requirement for membership.

Issues of Masonic administration, such as the admission of female members, the presence of a VSL in our rituals, mutual recognition and visitation are of secondary importance and might possibly be resolved in time although not without considerable difficulty. Admission of atheists, in the name of greater freedom of thought, is a much more crucial issue.

In today's world how often are we told that "times are changing"? How often do we have to reply, if silently, "but our fundamental beliefs are not". If Freemasonry cannot hold firm on this issue, where are our principles? This is not just a theoretical debate about our ancient landmarks or about international Masonic administration. However reluctant we may feel in refusing recognition to this body of good people, the consequences of doing so are potentially much more painful.

I would welcome any worthy French Freemason into my home and my circle of friends but I would rather continue to hold a pitying respect for atheists than make the changes necessary to admit them as participants in my spiritual life.

Appendix A - List of Popes with French ancestry.

1. Pope Silvester II, 999-1003: Gerbert of Aurillac.
2. Pope Stephen IX, 1057-1058: Frederick of Lorraine.
3. Pope Nicholas II, 1058-1061: Gerard of Burgundy.
4. Bl. Pope Urban II, 1088-1099: Otho of Lagery (or Otto or Odo).
5. Pope Callistus II, 1119-1124: Guido of Vienne.
6. Pope Urban IV, 1261-1264: Jacques Pantaléon.
7. Pope Clement IV, 1265-1268: Guy Foulques.
8. Bl. Pope Innocent V, 1276: Pierre de Tarentaise.
9. Pope Martin IV, 1281-1285: Simon de Brie.
10. Pope Clement V, 1305-1314: Bertrand de Got.
11. Pope John XXII, 1316-1334: Jacques d'Euse.
12. Pope Benedict XII, 1334-1342: Jacques Fournier.
13. Pope Clement VI, 1342-1352: Pierre Roger.
14. Pope Innocent VI, 1352-1362: Stephen Aubert.
15. Bl. Pope Urban V, 1362-1370: Guillaume de Grimoard.
16. Pope Gregory XI, 1370-1378: Pierre Roger de Beaufort.

Appendix B – Sequence of Events during the Revolution

1. **February 1787** - Assembly of "notables" called by Charles-Alexandre de Calonne.
2. **May 5, 1789** - Estates-General met at Versailles
3. **July 14, 1789** - Parisian mob seized the Bastille.
4. **Aug 4, 1789** - National Assembly abolished feudal regime and tithe.
5. **Aug 26, 1789** - Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen.
6. **Oct 5, 1789** - Paris mob marched on Versailles, brought King to Paris.
7. **June 20, 1791** - Louis XVI tried to flee country.
8. **April 20, 1791** - France declared war on Prussia and Austria.
9. **Aug 10, 1792** - revolutionaries occupied Tuileries, imprisoned the royal family.
10. **Jan 21, 1793** - Louise XVI executed.
11. **Sept 5, 1793** - Reign of Terror (to July 27, 1794) by Committee of Public Safety.
12. **July 27, 1794** - (9 Thermidor II) "White Terror" coup against Jacobins and Robespierre by National Convention.
13. **Oct. 5, 1795** - Napoleon crushes Royalist attempt to seize power in Paris.
14. **Nov, 1795** - Directory established (until Nov 9, 1799).
15. **Nov. 9, 1799** - Coup of 18-19 Brumaire VIII Napoleon proclaimed end of the revolution and instituted Consulate.