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## **“The Enlightenment as Lived: Late Eighteenth Century European Masonic Reformers”**

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**Resumen**

A finales del siglo XVIII, durante un momento clave de la Ilustración y la consolidación de los estados-nación y sus respectivas sociedades civiles, Europa occidental experimentó un proceso de transformación intelectual y política. Por lo tanto, mi tesis es que en esta coyuntura, la masonería jugó un papel particular y prefiguró el rol que tendría en la vida política del siglo siguiente (XIX), en especial en los países católicos europeos y latinoamericanos con la adopción de reformas seculares y políticas visibles en la historia intelectual de la masonería europea desde la década de 1770. Esta investigación toma como ejemplos de análisis del cambio en la masonería hacia una propuesta a las acciones concretas en la búsqueda de la transformación del Estado, algunas de las obras de Gotthold Lessing, el conde de Mirabeau, Herder, Frederick Schlegel y el caballero Ramsay, así como los casos de las organizaciones nacionales de grandes logias en Los Países Bajos, Gran Bretaña, Alemania y los Estados Unidos.

**Abstract**

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, during a key moment of the Enlightenment and the consolidation of nation-states and their respective civil societies, Western Europe underwent a process of intellectual and political transformation. Therefore, my thesis demonstrates how Freemasonry played a particular role in this and how it foreshadowed the role that it would have on the political life of the next century (19<sup>th</sup>), especially in Catholic countries in Europe and Latin America. We can see the role of Freemasonry in the adoption of secular reforms visible in the political and intellectual history of European Freemasonry since the 1770's. This research serves as an example of the analysis of change in Freemasonry towards a proposal to concrete actions in search of the transformation of the state. Some of the works used to create this thesis include works from Gotthold Lessing, the Comte de Mirabeau, Herder, Frederick Schlegel, Lord Ramsay, and the cases of the national organizations of grand lodges in the Netherlands, Britain, Germany and the United States.

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In the final decades of the eighteenth century, as Franco Venturi taught us to see, some enlightened circles turned toward deeds, toward concrete actions intended to reform society and government.<sup>1</sup> Masonic lodges played a distinctive role in the turn to action. Indeed I will be arguing here that the Masonic emphasis on concrete reform during the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century foreshadows the role that the 19<sup>th</sup> century lodges will play in the political life of Catholic countries in particular, in both in Europe and Latin America. The embrace of the secular and political reform is visible in the intellectual history of European Freemasonry as early as the 1770s.

As the freemason, Gotthold Lessing, has his fictional character, Falk, tell his interlocutor, Ernst - in the 1778 dialogue that bears their names - “deeds...good men and young men ...observe their deeds”- and let these speak for themselves. After reciting the many charitable actions undertaken by German and Swedish freemasons, Falk extols the necessity of doing good deeds “in the world.” Throughout their dialogue, *Ernst und Falk*, certain assumptions are basic: men and institutions require reform and renewal, religious differences separate humankind, freemasons aim at social equality, but they will be no better or worse than the civil society that surrounds them.<sup>2</sup> Writing at precisely the same time, the freemason Comte de Mirabeau made a similar observation about the lodges, and lamented that many lodges did little more for humankind than the occasional act of charity.<sup>3</sup> Yet Mirabeau, like Falk, believed that a brother should never abandon his lodge “nor...dissuade candidates from becoming members.”

Neither Lessing nor Mirabeau embraced disillusionment or gave up on the power of brotherhood, if properly disciplined, to enlighten humankind and to reform the state. From the wholehearted embrace of the secular, Falk inevitably turns to the state. By being centered in “die bürgerliche Gesellschaft” Falk can ask, “Do you believe that men were created for the state, or that states are for men?” He notes that states create divisions around wealth or religion; freemasons are the only men capable of healing those divisions. This meditation on the need for

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<sup>1</sup> Franco Venturi, *Settecento riformatore* (Turin: G. Einaudi, 1969), 5 vols.

<sup>2</sup> For an accessible text see Ion Contiades, ed., *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Ernst und Falk; mit den Fortsetzungen Herders un Friedrich Schlegels* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1968), 48, fifth dialogue “Falk: Indes hat freilich die freimaurerei immer und aller Orten sich nach der Bürgerlichen Gesellschaft schmiegen und biegen müssen, den diese war stets die stärkere. So mancherlei die bürgerliche Gesellschaft gewesen, so mancherlei Formen hat auch die Freimaurerei an zunehmen sich nicht entbrechen können...”

<sup>3</sup> *Memoirs of Mirabeau: Biographical, Literary, and Political, By Himself, his father, his uncle and his adopted child* (London: Edward Churton, 1835), 186-88, written in 1776. “If the heart of a Brother is capable of `love for his neighbor,’ if he is not infected with all social pestilence, that cold spirit of selfishness, which, as it considers nothing but the present moment, is entirely foreign to every real emotion of the heart, whether for virtue, or for fame, these ideas will bind him to the Order, make him espouse all its interests...”

reform allows Lessing to return to freemasonry, and to castigate the refusal of its German form to admit Jews. By contrast Mirabeau, inspired by the goals of freemasonry despite its many flaws, would set up a parallel organization to aid all of humankind through education and most importantly through the reform of law and government. Its members must be freemasons and labor for “the one object of the order of Freemasonry: THE GOOD OF ALL MANKIND.” As Mirabeau describes it, the second “great object is the correction of the actual system of law and government”. This correction may be “special or general, gradual or sudden, secret or open”.<sup>4</sup>

There was plenty with which to fault the lodges of the eighteenth century. Falk finds objectionable the superstitions about the Knights Templers, the recourse to the magical arts, the play with words, gestures and symbols, and not least, the inability to promote true and absolute equality. Yet Falk clearly implies that there are freemasons who support the American Revolution.<sup>5</sup> Far from Lessing “offer[ing] his century’s most scathing critique of freemasonry,” – Jonathan Israel’s curious reading of the text – *Ernst und Falk* directs the impulse for reform outward toward the state, and then inward, toward the lodges of its day. Falk, speaking for Lessing, locates freemasonry as a state of mind, a way of being in the world, and not as the imperfect behavior that he, along with Mirabeau, so readily observed in everyday lodges.

Why this turn within Masonic circles toward enlightened reform, why the laser beam on the state - and then on the lodges? I am arguing that in the move Lessing makes - rhetorically establishing a complete worldly reality where religion (or the divine) is rendered incapable of explaining the human condition - he has, as it were, boxed himself into a new and dual reality. An earlier, clandestine literature, explains how that reality could take shape. An anonymous philosophe, writing around 1720, points us toward it. In the words of *Le Philosophe* (1743) “the existence of God is the most widespread and deeply engrained of all the prejudices” and in its place *le philosophe* puts civil society “it is the only divinity that he will recognize on earth.” Trapped by the doctrinal systems of the established churches, attention to government becomes futile, “When one is a captive under the yoke of religion, one becomes incapable of the great visions that call on government, and that are so necessary for public situations”.<sup>6</sup>

Lessing would never have said in print, or perhaps even thought, such blatantly atheistical sentences. Nevertheless the words of *le philosophe* make crystal clear the linkage now made

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 46. For the misreading of *Ernst und Falk* see Jonathan Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind. Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 72-73.

<sup>6</sup> [[C. Chesneau Du Marsais], *Nouvelles liberté de Penser* (Amsterdam, 1743), “Le Philosophe,” one of five tracts, pp. 165, 188 “La société civile est pour ainsi dire, la seule divinité qu’il reconnoisse sur la terre.” <http://www.pierre-marteau.com/c/jacob/clandestine.html>. For a portion of the text see <http://www.vc.unipmn.it/~mori/e-texts/philos.htm> - “Il seroit inutile de remarquer ici combien le philosophe est jaloux de tout ce qui s’appelle honneur et probité: c’est là son unique religion. La société civile est, pour ainsi dire, la seule divinité qu’il reconnoisse sur la terre; il l’encense, il l’honore par la probité, par une attention exacte à ses devoirs et par un désir sincère de n’en être pas un membre inutile ou embarrassant”. “L’entendement, que l’on captive sous le joug de la foi, devient incapable des grandes vues que demande le gouvernement, et qui sont si nécessaires pour les emplois publics”.

available through a radical version of the Enlightenment, i.e., the attention to civil society and government permitted by the absence of the deity. If there is only this world – only civil society – then the other equally real entity must be the institutions of the state, and possibly also those of the church. When meeting in orderly groups, without a single compelling purpose such as science or literature, and when possessed of a set of ideals clearly articulated by Falk, would not the experience of the lodges, with their constitutions, votes, orations, fines for bad behavior, charitable works, and attention to decorum, lead to meditations upon religion and government? More than the scientific societies, or the salons and literary circles, the lodges embraced a specific social ideology that included the bonds of brotherhood, the need “to meet upon the level,” and the necessity for disciplined adherence to the rules for behavior put in place by every lodge.

The lodges could in effect function as schools for governing, and as such they provide an indispensable link between civil society and the Enlightenment. In the earlier part of the century, when it is believed Du Marsais wrote *Le Philosophe*, radical texts dwelt more noticeably on religion and its perils. By the second half of the century, particularly but not exclusively in absolutist states, the philosophically enlightened gaze shifted toward the state and its institutions.<sup>7</sup> In Paris in 1789 Mirabeau became one of the revolution’s most astute observers and participants. Late in the century, also under the impact of events in Paris, other German freemasons responded to the tone Lessing set, and they too looked to the Prussian state and its discontents.

In the wake of the French Revolution Herder offered his own meditation on freemasonry and the state, in the form of a dialogue that is clearly in conversation with *Ernst und Falk*. He begins by embracing “all the good that has been done...in the world.” Herder, himself a freemason, reiterates “in the world.” He starts with Falk’s question, are men created for the state, or the state for men? He then, like Falk, notes all the divisions that states impose upon men, and he ends by invoking his desire to have a society composed of all the thinking men in the entire world.<sup>8</sup> Herder’s embrace of a cosmopolitan and utopian order is another example of Masonic language being employed to investigate the ideal of civil society. This order, too, is perfectly in keeping with the logic of the secular impulse that begets attention to civil society and the state.

In his pre-Catholic, Masonic period, and a few years after Herder, Frederick Schlegel also responded to *Ernst und Falk*. His account registers a growing discomfort with the state and a desire to ground society and human welfare on an idealist philosophy. The equality unleashed by the French Revolution has become tyrannical, he asserts, and both Ernst and Falk, in Schlegel’s

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<sup>7</sup> “L’entendement que l’on captive sous le joug de la foi, devient incapable des grandes vues que demande le gouvernement, et qui sont si nécessaires pour les emplois publics. On fait croire au superstitieux que c’est un être suprême qui l’a élevé au-dessus des autres; c’est vers cet être, et non vers le public, que se tourne sa reconnaissance.” It is thought that du Marsais wrote the text in 1720. For a printed copy of the text, see Alain Mothus & Gianluca Mori, eds., *Philosophes sans Dieu. Textes Athées clandestins du xviiiè Siècle* (Paris; Champion, 2010), 37 for this quote.

<sup>8</sup> *Gespräch über eine-unsichtbar-sichtbare Gesellschaft* in Ion Contiades, ed., *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Ernst und Falk; mit den Fortsetzungen Herders un Friedrich Schlegels*, 69.

dialogue, look to freemasonry to provide an alternative experience. All three late Enlightenment German philosophers engaged with freemasonry, all saw its faults, and all found, in their reflections on it, a way toward expressing their fears and hopes for both the state and civil society. Neither Herder nor Schlegel saw anything scathing in Lessing's dialogue.

Lessing, Herder and Schlegel are at the end of a long history, not at its beginning. As I have argued elsewhere, the linkage between freemasonry and the Enlightenment, and both to politics, begins with the assumption that after 1700 the growing centralized power in the nation states riveted the attention both of aristocratic elites and men of the professions – commerce, law, medicine, etc. Government increasingly mattered; it captivated, enticed, and just as frequently, irritated and confounded. For men gazing at its power, but possessed of little access to it, the lodges were places where one could, in effect, govern, elect officials, be elected, orate, and pay taxes in the form of dues, or fines imposed for bad behavior. The lodges became schools of government complete with constitutions that permitted one-man, one vote.

As early as 1738 the Chevalier Ramsay gave a now famous oration, and argued that freemasons attempt to create “an entire spiritual nation”.<sup>9</sup> In the 1760s a piece of Masonic jewelry confiscated in Brussels displayed “the arms of France illuminating the attributes of freemasonry”.<sup>10</sup> In 1774 the new Grand Lodge of Paris chose to establish a national assembly, representatives came to it from all over France, and each had one vote. Identifying with the institutions of government could, however, lead to lament. The 1779 orator in Grenoble remarked “in our modern institutions where the form of government is such that the majority of subjects must stay in the place assigned them by nature, how is it possible to contribute to the common good?”<sup>11</sup> This attraction to governmentality offers one explanation for why women could so easily be excluded from most lodges. Until well into the twentieth century, governing was said to be the work of men.

It has now been documented, by Jessica Harland-Jacobs, how British freemasons in their colonies sought to affirm the superiority of Western civilization while nevertheless facing, and sometimes yielding to, the pressure from indigenous elites to join their ranks. Over time, as she demonstrates, the British experienced Masonic idealism being used against them and their habits of governing. Also in the late eighteenth century reformers and republicans in the colony of Ireland thought that freemasonry offered the best model for fashioning a new society for “the execution of plans for the complete liberation of the country”.<sup>12</sup> Such became the Society of the United Irishmen, a key player in the Irish Rebellion of 1798.

The Masonic fascination with the state was also reflected in the national organizations of Grand Lodges. Recall that in 1756 when Dutch freemasons organized their national system of

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<sup>9</sup> For a facsimile copy of the oration, see G. van Veen, “Andrew Michael Ramsay,” *Thoth* 28, n. 2 (1977): 27-57.

<sup>10</sup> Archives generales, Brussels, MS 1105 A 124.

<sup>11</sup> Grenoble, Bibliothèque municipale, MS Q 50.

<sup>12</sup> For Drennan, see Margaret C. Jacob, *Strangers nowhere in the World* (Philadelphia, PA: Penn Press, 2006), 105, 117-19; and for the colonies see the entire, Jessica L. Harland-Jacobs, *Builders of Empire. Freemasons and British Imperialism, 1717-1927* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

authority and governance, the Grand Lodge of The Netherlands, they adopted as they said, "the form" of the Estates General of the Republic. The Dutch example of the symbiotic relationship between the state and secular voluntary societies manifested itself in the imagined national and Masonic community that took shape in The Hague in 1756.

Looking back some years later, the Provincial Grandmaster, de Vignoles, reiterated the characterization of the Grand Lodge's structure as being that of the Estates General. Indeed he recommended it as the best form of governance to German lodges that were having difficulty arriving at a comparable system of national cohesion. He admonished them to adopt an Estates General as "the sovereign tribunal of the Nation".<sup>13</sup> When he wrote of the nation, De Vignoles meant the Masonic nation. Just like the Dutch Estates General where each province retained a high degree of sovereignty, in the lodges the form of decentralized governance permitted each Dutch lodge to retain its independence. The evidence from De Vignoles' description, and the information we have about Masonic rituals of the period used by the Grand Lodge in The Hague, suggest the same symbiotic relationship between the eighteenth-century Dutch lodges and the Dutch government. In the Dutch Republic typical forms of governmental life were intensely local: *schutterij*, *vroedschappen*, and *landdagen*. Yet none of those local bodies are mentioned in any of the records of Dutch freemasonry with which I am familiar.

In the Austrian Netherlands (Belgium), where records are preciously few for the period before the 1780s, what little we have suggests a devotion to the central government in Brussels, and after 1780 an identification (despite his suspicions) with Joseph II and government-sponsored enlightened reform. The Austrian Netherlands possessed webs of local authority, urban and clerical. Urban magistrates may have joined the lodges in large numbers, but the lodges look to the center, toward Brussels, more precisely toward Vienna. When the Marquis de Gages wrote from Mons to the Grand Lodge in The Hague in December 1769, he identified himself as a true chamberlain of "the Roman Imperial and Royal Majesties". He sent the colors and Great Seal of the Grand Lodge of the Austrian Netherlands, and asked to open formal communication between the two Grand Lodges. He could have been writing to a foreign power; and in a sense, he was.

Being spiritual nations, the various Grand Lodges also made foreign alliances and treaties. In 1771, the minutes of the Grand Lodge in The Hague record that "England promises not to grant constitutions anymore to lodges within this territory." The London Grand Lodge had declared the Dutch Grand Lodge "free and independent", and recommended that the Dutch lodges operating under an originally English constitution, join the Dutch body. The Provincial Grandmaster of England, de Vignoles, is thanked at those same proceedings for having seen to it that "each Empire [realm] or State will have its own supervision." This settlement became possible because the British Grand Lodge finally recognized that the Dutch lodges were different

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<sup>13</sup> For Vignoles see Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment. Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth Century Europe* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 85 quoting from Grand Lodge of the Netherlands, Kloss MSS 190 E. 29.



"due to the laws of the country".<sup>14</sup>

Part of the Anglo-Dutch agreement had an imperial dimension. Each Grand Lodge would allow lodges in the other territories to appeal only to the home country for a constitution. The Dutch Grand Lodge approved lodges in the slave colony of Surinam, and indeed had its own ambassador, brother van Hoogwerf, who was appointed foreign deputy Grandmaster. He was instructed to visit lodges in the West Indies, in Surinam and Curacao. He reported back that the lodges there were doing well, and that they were part of "our National Household".<sup>15</sup> Like the nation-state, civil society also aided European conquest and domination. Where the forms of civil society grew strong and gradually independent from state intervention, they possessed the capacity to undo absolutist rule.

The impulse to govern derived historically from the very source of European freemasonry, from Britain. By 1710 English lodges had also elected a Grand Master, Sir Christopher Wren, and by the 1720s the Grand Lodge in London could claim the loyalty of affiliated lodges in other cities and towns. In 1736 thirty-three Scottish lodges sent representatives to an assembly that created the Grand Lodge of Scotland. They also elected a Grand Master, but only after the candidate renounced any hereditary claims on the office.

Merit, not heredity, was meant to facilitate Masonic equality. Throughout the eighteenth century, however, freemasons were keenly aware of how fragile an ideal equality could be. Late in the century a French orator lamented that men are not equal, that there is a terrible but natural inclination to want to dominate over others.<sup>16</sup> Despite such inclinations let the record show that one of the first freemasons we can identify in Paris was a "Negro trumpeter" in the King's guard.<sup>17</sup>

The contemporary critic of eighteenth-century freemasonry, Jonathan Israel, would have us believe that in Germany, and by implication everywhere else, freemasonry "betrayed the Enlightenment's essential ideals."<sup>18</sup> He might have us believe that precisely because of the Masonic identification with national governments – many of which would come after 1789 to be seen as *ancien regimes* - the lodges embraced the corruption we associate with kings and

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<sup>14</sup> MS 41:48 April 14, 1771; the Library of the Grand Lodge. For the comment about "free and independent," see MS 41:48 (2) August 19, 177°.

<sup>15</sup> MS 41:48 April 14, 1771; the Library of the Grand Lodge, The Hague.

<sup>16</sup> [Anon.], *Essai sur les Mysteres et le veritable objet des Franc-Maçons*, second edition, Amsterdam, 1776 (first edition, Paris, 1771), Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, Res. II 2326 (2, i—v); 18—19: "Les hommes ne sont egaux, ni par la force, ni par les talents, ni par la figure. Chacun a outre cela cette terrible & naturelle inclination de vouloir dominer sur les autres, ii seroit impossible de rendre tous les individus parfaitement egaux. L'egalite des franc-maçons consiste a se regarder tous comme freres, & a se rendre réciproquement les devoirs de la bienfaisance & de la charité. La bonne morale est fondée sur cette egalite, et la charité chrétienne a ce même principe pour base".

<sup>17</sup> Bibliothèque Arsenal, *ibid.*, f. 347, the spy Dadvenel writing on February 5, 1746: "qui c'est Danguy La vieille qui y a preside comme Le venerable, ou le Maitre de Loge, charpentier, La mussette y etoit ii y voit un Negre qui est des menus plaisirs du Roy une trompette des Gardes du Roy[,] un Sergent du Regimen du Roy qui était La supotte de la maitress de la maison." Cf. Cécile Révauger, *Noirs et francs-maçons* (Paris: Éditions Maçoniques de France, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> Israel, 72.

aristocrats. There is no time here to survey lodges in particular countries; rather I will take as my example of the compatibility of enlightened values and Masonic aspirations two radical thinkers whose revolutionary credentials are unassailable, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine. In 1782 we find Franklin as *Le Venerable*, the master of the lodge of the nine sisters in Paris. From the early 1730s after his initiation in a Philadelphia lodge, Franklin had been an active freemason and a leader within the American lodges.

Very shortly after Franklin joined St. John's Lodge in Philadelphia, according to his *Autobiography*, he decided: "There seems to me at present to be a great Occasion for a united Party of Virtue, by forming the Virtuous and good Men of all Nations into a regular Body, to be governed by suitable good and wise Rules, which good and wise Men may probably be more unanimous in their Obedience to, than common people are to common Laws". To these ends, Franklin later recalled, he had spent much of that period of his life trying to discover what every religion had in common so that it could serve as the foundation for a universal, natural religion to which all could agree. Of the ethical principles he recalled, the most striking and most relevant was "That the most acceptable service of God is doing Good to Man".

Franklin drew more from freemasonry than the search for a universal, natural religion. He also learned lessons in group behavior and political organizing. In 1774, he co-founded with David Williams, the Society of 13, a deistic circle that included in its original membership Franklin, Williams, Major Dawson, Thomas Bentley (assistant to Joshua Wedgewood), James Stuart, John Whitehurst, Thomas Day, and Daniel Solander. The Society of 13, while obviously echoing the Masonic model of a secret society of learned men, kept the Masonic tradition of limiting the membership of lodges in persecuted countries, in this case to 13. All of the men in, and/or associated with the group, were radical Whigs and republicans; they were not entirely wrong in thinking of themselves as persecuted. Richard Price, Joseph Priestley, Benjamin Vaughan, J.R. Forster, Edward Bancroft, Thomas Paine, and David Hartley were among the big names associated with the group. Vaughan corresponded extensively with Franklin, particularly on the matters of moral philosophy, and was more familiar than most with Franklin's attempts at elucidating an ethical system (see Part Two of the *Autobiography* for some of their correspondence along these lines). All of these men supported the American Revolution, and the group served, above all else ultimately, to get English and French radicals safely and secretly across the Atlantic. Jefferson, even though his temperament was most likely not for secret societies and philosophical liturgies, nevertheless knew of the group, corresponded with its members, and as a deist shared their views on religion and politics. Franklin, Price, and Priestley were associated with another British radical organization that was obviously descendent from Masonic influence: the Grand Lodge of the Constitutional Whigs that traced its origins back to the principles of the Glorious Revolution of 1689 and the preceding years of opposition political thought.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> For Franklin and freemasonry see the most recent account in J.A. Leo Lemay, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin. Printer and Publisher 1730-1747* (Philadelphia: Penn Press, 2006), vol. 2, chapter 3. Nicholas Hans, "Franklin,

In the case of Paine the links to freemasonry are tantalizing, but his actual membership in a lodge is yet to be proven. Paine wrote and fought for American independence from England, wanted to see slavery abolished, opposed the death penalty, and was active in the making of Pennsylvania's constitution – the first formal political entity *in the world* to make slavery illegal in its territory. Sometime between 1803 and 1805 Paine wrote an essay entitled “Origin of Freemasonry,” and in it he argued for the Druids and the Egyptians as the source of their religion of the Sun. “The Masons, in order to protect themselves from the persecution of the Christian church, have always spoken in a mystical manner of the figure of the Sun in their Lodges, or, like the astronomer Lalande, who is a Mason, been silent upon the subject”. Paine knew a great deal about eighteenth-century freemasonry and he evinces no hostility toward it, reserving that for the Christian Church. His myth of origin has a great deal to do with radical Whig ideology that enshrined the Druids as being at the root of English government and liberty, of course, therefore, predating the Norman yoke.

If Paine's membership cannot be proven, his association with Nicolas de Bonneville is easily shown as he lived in his home in Paris, from 1797 to 1802. His sons followed Paine back to America. De Bonneville was a committed freemason and an idealistic one at that. Paine's purpose in writing about the origins of freemasonry has to do with his search for the original, natural and universal religion; a goal shared by Amsterdam pantheists like Rousset de Missy, or mystically inclined elites like the Parisian members of Les Philalèthes. By the 1780s they had convinced themselves that only a syncretic merger of “theosophy, alchemy...the religious ceremonies and the Rites of different institutions, Masonic or otherwise” would produce a world religion that the devout of whatever persuasion could embrace.

The enlightened search for alternatives to absolutism in church and state took many forms to be sure, and oftentimes these involved the ideals to be extracted from Masonic experience. Lessing's dialogue on the meaning of freemasonry ends abruptly, and he implies that the subject should be broached again. Herder and Schlegel obliged, and they labored to make sense of the gap between Masonic ideals and the hum-drum reality of lodge meetings, their craving for recognition from the high born, their self-satisfied reliance on annual charity drives. All the philosophes whom we can associate with the world of eighteenth-century freemasonry pondered the contradictions between the Enlightenment as lived and its highest ideals.

We may want to take a holier-than-thou approach and castigate the lodges for being no better than the civil society in which they were set. Turning to Kant may enable us to better historize their situation. Indeed he explains their failings well. Eighteenth-century freemasons lived in an age of Enlightenment, but they (like us) were not part of an enlightened age.

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