

Civil Society in an Uncivil Age: An Agenda for Freemasonry, Past and Present

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Ample evidence exists to suggest that beginning in the eighteenth century – in both Western Europe and the American colonies – freemasonry acted as a civilizing influence. In mid-century London lodges paraded to theatres and actually watched in polite silence. Such was not the case for most audiences. In multiple orations, in every European language, we can find masonic brothers praising the order for its practices of friendship and mutual respect.¹

An orator in Paris during the 1780s told his brothers “the hearts of Masons touch one another everywhere at every point ... The happiness of one is necessarily the happiness of all.”² In the same period, masonic orators said, “every lodge is a democracy.” British orators proclaimed, “we wish to unite all men of an agreeable humour and enlightened understanding,” and furthermore “all men are by nature brethren, so consequently all men are by nature equal.”³ Dutch freemasons said that the entire world is a republic, each nation is a family; every individual is a son.⁴ In its first century of existence masonic idealism about society and humankind was infectious.

In the same spirit French freemasons of the 1780s provided cash to brothers or their widows who had been caught in distress or poverty. They asked brothers who were doctors to assist ill brothers and to do so without a fee. Dutch and Belgian lodges had similar funds. Uniformly in their letters to the Grand Orient, the supplicants recount their social probity and hard work when times were good; bad luck – and not bad behavior – explained their need. The lodges sought to make up for the failings of the market without for a second repudiating the financial inequities of the societies in which they lived. Unlike most of French society, the freemasons regularly elected their leaders and expected them to speak knowledgeably about masonic ideals. In The Hague at mid-century the constitution book of a lodge for men and women proclaimed, “brothers and sisters [will deport themselves] without vice, in order to augment the good manners of society.”⁵

Yet brothers also sought to hold the world at bay and to offer a corrective to vice, self-interest, superstition, pride, and corruption. They regularly referred to non-masons as “the propane.” Especially in Catholic Europe freemasons kept a low profile while working to assist brothers, orphans, and the indigent more generally. There was a tension between masonic ideals and a fear of notoriety in the public gaze.

That was then, what about now?

In the English speaking world lodges have frequently taken their direction from the behavior of the British Grand Lodge. At least that was the case in the twentieth century up to the end of World War II. In the early decades of the last century the Grand Lodge opted for discretion, for not being seen or heard. Its stature was enhanced by royal and aristocratic membership, and its option followed the practices of king and court.⁶ The era

before 1945 saw extreme right-wing movements throughout Continental Europe; Britain was not without its anti-masonic, anti-Semitic fringe. Discretion avoided vicious public attacks, but first and foremost the Grand Lodge imitated the mores of king and aristocracy. The less said about them all, the better.

The policy had one fatal flaw: the Grand Lodge did not work to counter hostilities or conspiracy theories as well as common misunderstandings of the purpose of masonic brotherhood. Since the 1950s, scandal and fear mongering in British and American journalism has been on the rise; witness the phone-hacking behavior of the now defunct *News of the World*. Even a respectable newspaper, *The Guardian* said that a freemason was behind some of the worst behavior traced to the *News*.⁷

The consequence over the last thirty years, when journalism became more aggressive, has been a flood of public attention, a fair bit of it negative in tone or content. In January of this year the British newspaper, *The Independent*, opened its report on freemasonry and the police with the following: “Secret networks of Freemasons have been used by organised crime gangs to corrupt the criminal justice system, according to a bombshell Metropolitan Police report leaked to *The Independent*.”⁸ The response of the Grand Lodge? No comment. Two years earlier the BBC had reported that British freemasons are attempting to reverse the image of secrecy and to talk openly about the order.⁹ If that change is underway it is hard to document. The habit of discretion still holds among the upper classes in Britain and it continues to dominate official masonic responses to the scandal mongering of the press.

If some of this discretion sounds familiar it may have something to do with a similar reticence found among many of the American and European Grand Lodges. Masonic charity and philanthropy are indisputable and constitute a singular form of civility and decency. There is nothing reticent about masonic giving. The issue of *incivility* in our public discourse, particularly with regard to politics and race, presents a different and more intractable problem. If American and European Grand Lodges were to institute programs to combat public incivility would they not rapidly move freemasonry out of its comfort zone of discretion? Such seminars or programs would require inserting the lodges into public discussion. The issue seemed central to the deliberations of the leaders of American freemasonry when they met in March of 2014 in Baltimore.

The question of its public persona is as old as masonry itself. Within twenty years of the founding of the Grand Lodge in London in 1717, freemasonry came under attack and not just in Catholic Europe. The lodges were forbidden in the Dutch Republic because of their Orangist associations; the French police spied upon them; even in Britain, where they were a homegrown phenomenon, attacks from the pulpit still occurred.¹⁰ Why would present-day freemasons bother to take the risk of openly engaging with the problem of incivility and in the process throw light on some of the worst offenders? To use an American example, no one needs the lodges attacked by Rush Limbaugh; or how about by Jean-Marie Le Pen or Dieudonne? In the United States the lodges are now already marked for disfavor by radio stations purporting to be Christian.¹¹ Conspiracy theories still lurk out there in the shadows, as a brief search of the Internet will confirm.

If it seems that I have made the argument for freemasons as masons staying out of the public arena, that is not my intent. Rather the point needs to be made that in tackling any public issue – especially where politics is involved – the leadership of the Grand Lodges should expect a certain amount of hostility. When I had the privilege of sitting in on discussion groups formed in Baltimore to address the issue of the masonic response to incivility I noted that some men were hostile to the very idea of getting involved in any public issue. One particularly hostile brother – when learning that I taught in the University of California system – pointedly asked if it still employed the black American Communist, Angela Davis. Of course I could not remember if she had retired or not, but I also noted the tauntingly political nature of the question. Certainly the Grand Lodges have their work cut out for them.

How then to proceed? Going back to the original meaning of civil society may provide some assistance. As originally formulated by the German philosopher, George Hegel (d. 1831), the concept of civil society denotes a zone of independent social life, separate from the state and from the traditional institutions of family, church, confraternities etc. It is a place where the individual can be independent, mindful of events, forceful in his/her opinions, and also exercise the freedom that is the essence of civilized society. For Hegel, “The history of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom.”

The progress of freedom as postulated by Hegel would suggest that the uncivil has just as much right to exist as does the polite. But what if the uncivil drives people out of the zone of engagement, forced out by the uncouth, the mean, impolite, racist, sexist, etc.; members are left then to retreat into the privacy of family – or even of the lodge. If that is what is now happening – and it seems to me that it is the case – then participants in civil society have an obligation to change the nature and tone of the discussion. It is no secret that hostility to Muslims and Jews is on the rise in Europe; are the lodges willing or able to address the issue?

We think of freemasonry as a part of civil society, but currently an odd, cautious part. The lodges eschew politics and religion (sometimes in history more honored in the breach than in the execution), but does that render them ineffective when, or if, they participate in the public sphere? Could the current reticence – visible in Baltimore – to engage with the reality of the uncivil signal a retreat inward? It may. But if it does then the lodges need to rethink their role in a republic.

At its eighteenth-century origins freemasonry proclaimed values very much derived from what may be described as classical republicanism. Virtue lay at the heart of an ethical society, one that eschewed mindless luxury, greed and self-interest. Consistently lodges on either side of the Atlantic – or the Channel – talked about moral regeneration, about how patriots would obey the laws and still work to reform society and government. Masonic orators invoked the Roman republic as the ancient site where republican virtue was practiced and applied. Clearly those ideals would work best in actual republics – such as were created in the late eighteenth century here and in North America.

Let us go back to the eighteenth-century masonic leaders, the theorists of the movement, and look for guidance. Late in the century German freemasons responded to the tone Gotthold Lessing set in his important masonic dialogue, *Ernst und Falk*, and they too looked outward, to the Prussian state and its discontents. As the freemason, Lessing, has his fictional character, Falk, tell his interlocutor, Ernst, that action is required, “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 the dialogue of *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.¹² Writing at precisely the same time, the French 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.¹³ 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 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.”¹⁴

There was plenty with which to fault the lodges of the eighteenth century. Falk finds objectionable the superstitions about the Knights Templars, 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.¹⁵ *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.

In the wake of the French Revolution Johann Gottfried Herder offered his own meditation on freemasonry and the state, in the form of a dialogue that is clearly in dialogue 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.¹⁶ 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.

One final point needs to be stressed when we assess the political meaning of the enlightened search for social reform, and it has to do with religiosity. I will take as my example the thought of a revolutionary, Benjamin Franklin. In 1782 we find Franklin as *Le Venerable*, the master of the lodge of the Nine Sisters in Paris. For a few decades after his initiation in a Philadelphia lodge, Franklin had been an active freemason and a leader within the 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. All of these men supported the American Revolution, and the group served, above all else, to get English and French radicals safely and secretly across the Atlantic. Jefferson, even though his temperament was 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 and republican 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 oppositional and republican political thought.¹⁷

The Western form of republicanism, now modern and no longer classical, is central to the masonic legacy with its debt to the Enlightenment. It is not about the contemporary left or right, liberal or conservative, white or black, male or female. It is about virtuous behavior appropriate to citizens of a republic. Incivility is the antithesis of republican virtue precisely because it actually works to stifle freedom of expression. If this argument has merit, then how do contemporary freemasons proceed?

Look at the rules of civil behavior, spoken or tacit, that characterize any lodge meeting. Can these be codified and taught to anyone of good will? I suspect they can be. Are there specific forms of behavior that brothers seek to avoid? Can they be enumerated and presented to audiences interested in the secrets of freemasonry, who then learn in the process about civility? In Italian male and female freemasonry the custom of remaining silent during one's first year of membership is widespread.¹⁸ Is there anything comparable in the European and American lodges that might serve to make people stop and think before speaking? Finally there is the tortured history of race relations within American and African freemasonry. It is no secret that a crude segregation prevailed for over a century and can probably still be seen in some lodges. Yet enormous strides have been made to bring white and black brothers together.¹⁹ How did brothers do this, what principles guided the integration and what have been its benefits? Could local freemasons hold workshops to bring together blacks and whites, or Muslims and Jews, in the common cause of brotherhood?

Finally the lodges have considerable experience with philanthropy, especially in the area of health care. Can they bring recommendations to hospital professionals about how best to run their facilities? In my experience of lecturing to various lodges I find members eager for knowledge, wanting formal settings where serious conversation can occur about a range of topics; why not start the discussions first within lodges with the idea of articulating principles and protocols that inculcate civility? In the British Grand Lodge silence and discretion have reigned for so long; do American and European lodges want to follow the same path? Everywhere we live in republics without monarchy or aristocracy, or at best, in the Dutch and British cases, titular monarchy; leadership comes from representatives of the citizenry. Do masonic citizens have a particular responsibility to address social ills, to aid their fellow man? Those are questions that only freemasons can answer. Armed with their history of republican idealism, let the questioning begin.

¹ On the theatre see <http://www.freemasons-freemasonry.com/beresiner18.html>. And see A. Pink, (2007) "The Musical Culture of Freemasonry in Early Eighteenth-century London," Doctoral thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London.

² Found in the national library of France, Dossier of Trinité, FM 2 119 bis, and quoted in Kenneth Loiselle, *Brotherly Love. Freemasonry and Male Friendship in Enlightenment France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), p. 183. And see Margaret C. Jacob, *The Origins of Freemasonry. Facts and Fictions* (Philadelphia: Penn Press, 2006), chapter 4.

³ See Margaret C. Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment. Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp.64-65, 151.

⁴ [Anon.] *Essai sur les Mysteres et le veritable objet des Franc-Maçons* (Amsterdam: 1776), pp. 8-9.

⁵ Library of the Grand Lodge, The Hague, "Livre de Constitution" f. 10.

⁶ Paul Calderwood, *Freemasonry and the press in the twentieth century: a national newspaper study of England and Wales* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013).

⁷ <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2011/jun/08/phone-hacking-scandal-jonathan-rees>. Accessed April 22, 2015.

⁸ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/revealed-how-gangs-used-the-freemasons-to-corrupt-police-9054670.html>.

⁹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-17272611>; accessed April 22, 2015.

¹⁰ [Anon.], *Masonry the way to Hell: a sermon: wherein is clearly proved, both from reason and scripture, that all who profess these mysteries are in a state of damnation* (London: Robinson and Roberts, 1768).

¹¹ <http://tunein.com/topic/?topicId=79919052>; broadcast in July 2014.

¹² For an accessible text see Ion Contiades, ed., *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Ernst und Falk; met den Fortsetzungen Herders und Friedrich Schlegels* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1968), p. 48, fifth dialogue "Falk: In des 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...."

¹³ *Memoirs of Mirabeau: Biographical, Literary, and Political, By Himself, his father, his uncle and his adopted child* (London: Edward Churton, 1835), pp. 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...."

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 193.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 46.

¹⁶ *Gespräch über eine-unsichtbar-sichtbare Gesellschaft* in Ion Contiades, ed., *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Ernst und Falk; met den Fortsetzungen Herders und Friedrich Schlegels*, p. 69.

¹⁷ 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, Jefferson, and the English Radicals at the End of the Eighteenth Century," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 98, No. 6, Studies for the Library of the American Philosophical Society (Dec. 23. 1954), 406-426.

¹⁸ Lilith Mahmud, *The Brotherhood of Freemason Sisters. Gender, Secrecy, and Fraternity in Italian Masonic Lodges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), pp. 125-26.

¹⁹ Peter P. Hinks and Stephen Kantrowitz, eds. *All Men Free and Brethren. Essays on the History of African American Freemasonry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).