

Freemasonry and the Esoteric Societies of Victorian England

by Thomas D. Worrel

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Like it or not, there is a definite relationship between Freemasonry and societies or organizations that hold esoteric doctrines. That relationship may be merely the fact of a sizable commonality of membership between the Masonic fraternity and these other societies. But in keeping things in perspective, I think we can safely assume without recourse to polls or statistics that the vast majority of current American Freemasons have no interest in esoteric matters whatsoever. There is, however, a growing segment of current members who also hold membership or at least interest in other but clearly esoteric societies. We can formulate many questions at this point: e.g., what is the flow of interest or, in other words, what is the sequence of membership? Does the typical interested person join Freemasonry first or second? Is Freemasonry the first rung on the esoteric ladder or is it the last? Or, could we merely say that the esoterically minded person is attracted to both Freemasonry and the esoteric societies because possibly, in his mind at least, Freemasonry is another esoteric society. The relationship between the two is so intertwined that sometimes it is hard to distinguish them apart.

No doubt we can refine these questions even more, but here, we want to focus upon the Freemasonry and Freemasons of England's Victorian era. Was the state of affairs so much different in that time period from our own? We want to look at some of the things that went on in that time especially around the apparent founding of particular esoteric orders by prominent freemasons. Some elements to consider include the general social environment of that time as well

as the general state of Freemasonry. A few key aspects of this general environment will be considered here in a small way first. The emerging scientific discoveries were very important in their impact upon the society. Being the general cultural background, these elements impacted both Freemasonry and the esoteric societies. But, there are several key differences between the fraternity and the esoteric societies that can be pointed out. A discussion of these clear differences will entail the majority of this paper.

As regards the cultural background, it is common knowledge that the era is packed with exciting scientific discoveries in several areas. We can approximate the Victorian era as being between 1837 and 1901, so basically most of the 19th century. But the world had assimilated a major scientific paradigm shift in the prior 150 years due to Sir Issac Newton's (1642-1727) work and discoveries. The Western world had already experienced such a major paradigm shift in the 16th century when Copernicus's model of the sun centered solar system superceded the Ptolemaic earth centered model that held dominance for at least 1200 years. So by the Victorian era, not only had the earth been removed from the center of the universe, but also Newton had demonstrated in his laws of motion and gravity that nature, from the smallest particle to the stars, was very much like a law bound machine. During the Victorian era itself, new discoveries in geology brought into question the prevailing view of the fixity of species and the stability of biological forms which notions long held the Western mind captive.¹ Then the naturalist Charles Darwin (1809-1882) published his research *Origin of Species* in 1859, using a staggering range and magnitude of data as support.² And he followed that in 1871 with his work *The Descent of Man* which discussed human origins. "He tried to show how all human characteristics might be accounted for in terms of the gradual modification of anthropoid ancestors by the process of natural selection."³ All these scientific discoveries began revealing nature as a dynamic process; one of continual change and even evolution. The impact of the new discoveries was not confined to the scientific world alone but, as always, it affected the social disciplines and religion as well.

What were some of the social issues arising in the era? One of the interesting and surprising movements may have actually received support from Isaac Newton. In his *Principia* of 1687 he wrote of: "...a subtle spirit or fluid ... permeated solid bodies, binding them together, lying at the root of electricity and heat, and facilitating all biological processes." This theory set up the basis for other theories such as those of Mesmer (Mesmerism) and hypnosis.⁴ The work of the naturalists like Darwin lent itself to theories of phrenology. Both mesmerism and phrenology became very popular in the Victorian era. But one of the biggest movements was spiritualism. Spiritualism became popular in the 1850s. It is said that there is evidence that Queen Victoria herself attended séances and used the services of a medium. Thousands were swept up in the meetings, lectures and classes around Spiritualism given throughout England. Of course there was a scientific spirit that pervaded this movement of psychic phenomena and it led to the founding of the prestigious organization the "Society for Psychical Research" in London in 1882.

The next question to consider regards the state of Freemasonry in that era. What was going on the Masonic circles of the time? From what I can ascertain, it wasn't so much different than today in many regards. Elements from the Christian Kabbalah had already showed up much earlier – at least a hundred years earlier.⁵ The great mysteries of Freemasonry were left to the researchers as much then as now. "In fact, many masons did not seriously try to obtain answers. From time to time, they enjoyed spending a merry evening with good friends, 'sitting down to table' and singing Masonic songs. They were satisfied with this convivial side of Masonry."⁶ Another report of this atmosphere from the famous mystic of that era, Aleister Crowley: "I have visited Craft Lodges and Royal Arch chapters in Fraternal Accord in England, where the 'raising' and 'exaltation' were carried out in shirt sleeves, while cigars were smoked and the legs conveniently displayed on other chairs, and only employed to kick the candidate as he went round."⁷ He also relates a project he was on in 1912 to revise certain rituals and he comments: "So warned by the prolix, pious, priggish and platitudinous horrors of Freemasonry (especially the advanced degrees of the Scottish and Egyptian Rites), I resolved to cut the cackle..."⁸ Finally, and somewhat after that era,

but Britain nonetheless, the highly respected Freemason Walter L. Wilmshurst writes in his book *The Masonic Initiation* in 1924 that: “Some members have no wish to be masonically educated. They are content to be Masons in name only, and are satisfied that the monotonous, mechanical repetition of unexplained ceremonies and side-lectures fulfils every requisite, and conveys all that is to be known.”⁹ Other examples can be found but the point is that Freemasonry of the era was probably no more esoteric than now, at least in regards to its membership.

Before leaving this subject, it is important to state that several esoteric schools were formulizing themselves at this time. Many were founded by Freemasons, many were not. Several had Freemasons within their ranks regardless. Some examples include: the Theosophical Society (1875), the Hermetic Society (1882), the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor (1870), the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (1888), the Order of the Sacred Word a.k.a. Aurum Solis (1897) and others were founded during this era. In his work “Nineteenth-Century Esotericism”, Jean-Pierre Laurant makes the case that occultism was institutionalized around the time period 1870 -1907. That leaves us with a scenario of the institution of Freemasonry in the company of these esoteric societies. Many have members in common. This relationship has lasted down to the present day. Our next question then is what is the nature of this connection?

What distinguishes Freemasonry from the explicitly esoteric groups that sprang up around it in Victorian England? Upon considering this it seems we can come up with some general as well as some specific differences. I realize that these differences may break down upon closer scrutiny but I believe there is a general sense where they are applicable. Below I list several categories where I find differences:

Intention: It seems to me, on average, that there are a variety of intentions in the men who join Freemasonry. Whether it is to gather with other men, or have family outings, an involvement with charity, a type of religious expression, or even a mystical pursuit. But

regardless, it cannot be denied that men seek the fraternity for various reasons. It is almost the exact opposite with regard to intention with the esoteric societies. The intent upon entering the esoteric society is overwhelmingly uniform. Usually there is a very clear spiritual intent.

Mission: It seems that there are at least implied if not explicit missions for the two societies. Freemasonry it seems has always emphasized the prominent ethical mission it has. Regardless of religion or politics, there is an underlying stress upon ethical behavior, fraternity, the practice of the virtues and the development of character. The esoteric societies, on the other hand, make it explicit that theirs is a mystical or esoteric mission. One may argue that ethics and virtues are implicit in the mystical pursuit but that said, it is usually given less airtime in the esoteric groups.

Goal: In general, there is an underlying attitude that the Fraternity seeks to better society by being a model society. There is the goal of being a social good. There is a sense that the fraternity works for the greater good. Within the esoteric societies the sense is that the goal is centered upon the individual. There is the sense of a personal good to be achieved. No doubt the argument goes around full circle that in achieving the ultimate good for oneself, the entire human society benefits.

Theology: One would be hard pressed to make any other argument but that Freemasonry is strongly based upon the Judeo-Christian heritage. But the Fraternity has always been elusive in its exact theological stance. Because of its more universal and open sentiments, its avoidance of direct theological positions and possibly its secular origins, the Craft seems to actually avoid specific theological positions. This fact does not preclude us from understanding with some certainty its more general theological makeup. For example, from the prayers and lectures we can, I believe, make a strong case that a monotheistic position is being taken. Also, from the title "Great Architect of the Universe" a theologian would see the traditional modal of a transcendent Deity

that designed or created the universe – a deity that stands beyond and separate from the universe. In other words, pantheism is denied.

In contrast, the esoteric societies usually have a detailed theological position. Not only do they go into sometimes extreme details about the nature of God, the purpose of life and mankind's role, they also sometimes provide vast landscapes of the more subtle and spiritual worlds. Some are if not monotheistic then monist but all have roles for intermediary beings whether gods and goddesses, angels and demons, or the spirits of our dearly departed.

Instruction: In the Masonic fraternity, there is very little specific instruction on spiritual matters. Ethical and virtuous behavior is, no doubt, extolled in the strongest sense. One does not need instructions really in these matters because one is ethical by being ethical; one is virtuous by practicing the virtues. There are hints, prods and probes in many of the later degrees that actually reflect many of the same teachings as found in the esoteric schools. The difference is that the esoteric schools usually give quite detailed instruction in spiritual matters. Some even demand successful testing before moving into the next stage.

Gender Specific: The Craft of Freemasonry in Victorian England was, like today, vastly and exclusively male. There were co-masonic groups being formulated but the numbers have remained relatively small. On the other hand, the esoteric societies have tended to be open to both sexes. There were all male groups usually founded by Freemasons but even Freemasons themselves founded esoteric societies that were open to both genders (e.g.; Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn).

Other: There are several more distinctions that can be brought forth. I think most of them would fit into the larger categories above. Some further nuances would include the following: Freemasonry, while spiritual in many respects seems to be firmly rooted in the natural world. And the esoteric societies, while glorifying and sometimes celebrating nature in many ways, seems to be firmly rooted in the supernatural world. The Fraternity seeks and wants diversity in their brethren while the esoteric societies develop and market themselves

in a much more exclusive manner. For example, men of any degree of spiritual motive are welcomed into Freemasonry while one's spiritual motive would be quite strong to seek out membership in the more esoteric groups. I do not know how extensive the charity was in Victorian England but from that time we know that Freemasonry has taken on a large charitable role. The esoteric societies have not to any real extent but their normally small membership may be the deciding factor there. Finally, advancement in the esoteric societies is, at least in theory, purely spiritual and seeks to open the candidate to deeper spiritual dimensions and sometimes mystical experiences. I know of no specific Masonic practices or teachings that seek to explicitly promote deep mystical experiences. Some may argue, and I would wholeheartedly agree, that there are some Masonic rites that do point the Mason in that direction – at least if you interpret the rite in its most mystical way.

I conclude that while Freemasonry beyond any doubt has elements within it that can only be ascribed to the mystical and esoteric traditions, it does not necessarily mean that Freemasonry is an esoteric society. There are several elements within Freemasonry that can be linked with several other traditions including secular, ethical, philosophical and religious. The Freemasonry of Victorian England had unique intersections with esoteric groups. Many men were members of both types of societies. That situation continues to the present. While there is no mystery to the purpose and aims of the esoteric societies, Freemasonry continues to appeal to men far beyond the narrow confines of such groups. And in its mysterious way, Freemasonry has continued to embrace men from several walks of life.

¹ Barbour, Ian G.; *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues*, p. 51.

² Ibid., p.53.

³ Ibid., p. 53.

⁴ Roach, Paul. *Wandering Between Two Worlds: Victorian England's Search for Meaning.*, p. 4.

⁵ Mazet, Edmond. "Freemasonry and Esotericism" in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality* edited by Antoine Faivre, p. 256.

⁶ Ibid., p. 264.

⁷ Crowley, Aleister., *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley*, p. 697.

⁸ Crowley, Aleister. *Magick Without Tears*. p. 126.

⁹ Wilmshurst, W.L. *The Masonic Initiation*, p. 15.