

THE MYSTICAL BASIS OF MASONRY

by W. L. WILMSHURST

When, in 1646, the founder of the Ashmolean Library recorded that he had been made a Freemason at Warrington, or when, some five decades later, the architects, contractors and superintendents of works engaged upon the reconstruction of the metropolitan cathedral foregathered after their day's work in masonic assemblies of another character at the Goose and Gridiron Tavern in St. Paul's Churchyard, no one was likely to have foreseen that during the ensuing two centuries, and out of the then exiguous community of Freemasons, the enormous Masonic organization that now flourishes in our midst would have sprung into being. At the present moment, holding warrants from the central authority - the Grand Lodge of England - alone, there exist roughly some three thousand Masonic Lodges with an estimated aggregate membership of 150,000. The Scottish and Irish divisions of Great Britain work under separate constitutions of their own but upon similar lines to the English, whilst the British dependencies, the United States and every other civilized country in the world, with the exception of Japan, contain Masonic organizations, the total membership of which constitutes a great multitude which there is no opportunity of numbering, and which is annually increasing. It is thus obvious that the Masonic idea has caught and continues to hold a firm grip upon the imaginations of a very considerable body of humanity and that distinction of race and language has proved no bar to a universal appreciation of it. The inwardness of the phenomenon passes unobserved even within the Masonic community itself, although the external fact of the diffusion of the Masonic system throughout the world is, of course, not merely notorious, but is one of which large and agreeable advantage is taken by members of the Fraternity, and it may be profitable to accord a brief consideration to it here and to inquire what is the secret of the wide appeal Freemasonry has made during the last couple of centuries and still continues to make.

The problem is doubtless very complex, and to the question proposed a variety of offhand answers might be tendered, the value of which would depend largely upon the perspicuity of the respondent and his friendliness, or the reverse, towards the Masonic system. That that system provides occasion for social, fraternal - and, to meet the claims of the cynic, I will add - convivial, intercourse amongst a number of individuals who choose to segregate themselves into a distinctive fraternity with no deeper purpose than this is, one may reasonably submit, an incredible motive to justify an organization so firmly entrenched, so robust and associated with such personalities of eminence and character as have been formerly or still are actively connected with it. That it is an instrument for furthering practical benevolence and philanthropy, which it certainly does and does handsomely, is a similarly inadequate pretext; Masonry was not intended to be, and is not, a high-grade Friendly Society and its charitable energies are merely an incident of, and not the motive for, its existence. That it is a school of morality, tending to promote peace and goodwill amongst men, which is also wholly true, again fails to suffice, for men need not join a secret society, or enter into the obligations of silence required therefrom, merely to learn rudimentary ethics which it is the common duty of the whole world to know and practise. That it is, as is not infrequently alleged, an engine for promoting the mutual temporal aggrainment of its members to the prejudice of non-members; a cover for political intrigue, or a screen for propagating anti-religious ideas, are again idle suspicions. That political or other intrigues have in the past been conducted — as in connection with the pretensions of the Jacobites and Legitimists in both England and France in times of revolution — under the aegis of societies claiming to be Masonic, is doubtless a fact; but this, when established, proves merely

that a fraud has been committed upon a system devoted to entirely different purposes. Speaking for British Masonry to-day it is as innocent of such purposes as a mothers' meeting and, indeed, is wholly untinged with even the political partisanship manifested, whether passively or actively, by the official churches of the land; whilst the notorious ban of the Roman Church upon the Masonic brotherhood as being a trespass against the exclusive spiritual and temporal rights of the former is, upon a moment's reflection, stultified by that Church's own insidious political record.

By an eliminative process, then, we arrive at the sole remaining *raison d'etre* for the spread and attractiveness of the Masonic system, namely, the significance and implications involved within its ceremonial rites. Now if these, or some subtly-speaking voice in these, be not, when all irrelevant and accretionary considerations have been removed, the fundamental essence and the secret of the vitality and the development of Masonry, there remains no justification for its existence worthy of account. It matters not, that in the case of a large majority of the Fraternity that voice is not a loud one or that the significance, of its purport is but dimly recognized; and it may be admitted that among Masons themselves there are but few who have entered into a full intellectual realization of their own heritage. The fact remains that something veiled, latent and deep down in those rites speaks to something that is latent and responsive, however faintly, in those who participate in them; some remote *causa causans*, apart from the mere impressiveness and solemnity of the rites themselves, which for most remains unrealized and unformulated in the consciousness, but which, nevertheless, induces those who partake in them to feel that they are in the presence of a mystery that goes to the root of their being and that it is good for them to be there.

To what element in the Masonic rites, then, is to be traced the effectiveness and subtlety of the appeal alluded to? Among the Fraternity, as well as among the outside public, there are many who, in the absence of better information, suppose Masonry to be a system of immemorial antiquity, one which for some undefined reason or another, became instituted for no very definite object among primitive inhabitants of the East, and which for some equally indefinite purpose it is still desirable to perpetuate in the West. It is supposed also that the predecessors of the present Craft were concerned in operative building and erected, among other edifices of both earlier and later date, the national Temple of Israel at Jerusalem traditionally associated with the name of King Solomon. To dissipate the misconceptions inherent in these suppositions to dematerialise the outward veils and exhibit the inward and real significance of the matter, would take me far beyond the limits permitted to the present paper. It is a fact of commonest knowledge that systems of initiation into certain spiritual secrets and mysteries have obtained immemorially; it is doubtless true that guilds and trade-unions of operative builders possessing also elementary rites, secret signs, tokens, and privileges of membership, flourished from very remote epochs and subsisted until comparatively recent times; it is the fact also that at least the superiors and chief architects connected with such communities were profoundly instructed, as the fanes and monuments of the past and the great cathedrals of Christendom attest, in the principles of deep-reaching symbolism, and that with consecrated minds and reverent hands they introduced those principles into the construction of religious edifices by way of emblematising in stone the perfect temple man should build in his mind and body if ultimately he is to participate in another temple that is eternal and not built with hands. But this is far from saying that modern Masonry is the perpetuation, or the faithful, lineal image, either of ancient mystery-systems or of the operative masonic communities, though doubtless points of connection with both survive. Every Mason knows that his Craft purports to initiate into certain secrets and mysteries; every Mason knows that in that system the tools, tackle and terminology of operative masons are employed; but a moment's reflection will tell him that the secrets and mysteries referred to are not those of any industrial trade (which, of course, can have none of other than commercial value); that the incidents of the operative trade have been merely used as the outward apparel within which to clothe truths of a moral, and spiritual order; and lastly that the chief of the Craft degrees — that which embodies its great and central legend or traditional history, and as a preparation for instruction in which the antecedent degrees are, in theory, processes of purification — is devoted, from the first word of its opening to the last of its closing, to the veiled presentation of something

which, upon the one hand, is as unassociated with mundane architecture as the east is distant from the west, but which, upon the other, is an integral factor and root element of every system of religious initiation of antiquity.

In modern speculative Masonry, then, is to be traced a confluence of two distinct systems. Some time in the seventeenth century the elementary rites of membership used till then among the then virtually obsolete operative guilds became taken over, under circumstances now very obscure and by individuals almost equally so, and adapted to serve as the vehicle for the expression of a highly mystical and religio-philosophic doctrine disconnected altogether from mundane architecture and unrelated to any form of masonry other than that which, by employing metaphor, we may call the building — or perhaps the rebuilding and reintegration — of that incompleting temple, the human soul. It may be stated at this point that the credit of reaching the conclusion just mentioned is attributable wholly to Mr. A. E. Waite, who first gave voice to it in some illuminative papers in his *Studies in Mysticism* and added some confirmatory words in his subsequent book, *The Hidden Church of the Holy Grail*. The facts involved in the conclusion had previously escaped the observations of historians of Masonry, who speaking perhaps without any, and certainly without Mr Waite's extensive, knowledge of the movements in occultism and mysticism that were occurring behind the scenes of public history in Europe and England during the past few centuries, have been without adequate equipment for tracing the real genesis of modern Masonry. It is notorious that at, and for long prior to, that genesis this country and the continent were alive with occultists and initiates — of pretensions both meritorious and the reverse — connected with schools of alchemy, magic, Rosicrucianism and what not. The worthy name and written remains of Thomas Vaughan alone, apart from the wide testimony of contemporaneous literature to the prevalence of occult inquiry, testify that earnest students and genuine adepts were in the field at the date of the inception of the Masonic movement, and it is reasonable to deduce a connection between these and the movement itself. In the old operative system they, or some of them, found, as it were, a body prepared; they imported into that body a new spirit and gave it a transfigured life, a life which, in its maturer growth, is with us in such magnitude to-day. To use an expression of Mr. Waite's, "they made an experiment upon the mind of the age," and, be it remembered, it was an experiment made, and perhaps made with shrewd insight and foresight, at the commencement of an epoch when the tide of spiritual life and understanding in the official churches was about to run extremely low and the tide of rationalistic thought and scientific materialism to rise extremely high, and when, maybe, it was found desirable, for the benefit of a few in the dark days that were to follow, to kindle a new beacon-light testifying to a truth and a doctrine that have never been absent from the world.

It being my purpose in this article to bespeak the attention alike of those who are technically Masons and of those who are not to a further and extremely valuable work upon the esoteric development and mystical aspect of Masonry and its numerous ramifications and allied rites, the foregoing considerations may perhaps not be misplaced, since their intention is to clear the somewhat befogged atmosphere in which the true history and vital purpose of the Masonic system have become involved in both the Masonic and the public mind. In the volumes referred to — and they deal not with the external and virtually negligible history of Masonry, but with its interior content, its mystical purport and its place in the long chain of occult tradition — Mr. Waite demonstrates after what manner Masonry, in both its Craft and High Grades and its cognate rites, is an expression, perhaps far from a full, but still an indubitable, one, of that Secret Tradition which throughout all time has been perpetuated with the object of instructing those that were keenly enough concerned with solving the riddle of existence to consent to adopt the methods which that Tradition accredits and guarantees. The quest after that solution is for ever proceeding, amongst however few. We may call it the quest of the Graal; we may call it the search for the Lost Word, or the guarding of an empty Sepulchre; we may term it the achievement of the Great Work, or the discovery of the Philosopher's Stone; or we may refer to it in the terms of the Platonist as the task of re-integrating the divine element in man with the Divine Basis of the Universe. The systems have been many, but the quest, and the goal of the quest, are but one. Many of these systems, expressed sometimes in terms of baffling ingenuity lest the

pearls they contain should fall into unworthy hands, have long since passed away, to be replaced by others. Like the ever-renewed branches of the Tree of Life — *uno avulso non deficit alter aureus*; when one has served its day another has manifested without fail, as if (but is it not part of the Tradition that it is so ?) there was watching over Israel — the small, but continuous body of dedicated, undaunted aspirants — that which slumbers not nor sleeps; a watch, of unseen wardens whose concern is to keep ever open and illumined the pathway to that Centre whereto all experience leads and wherein all quests end.

Mr. Waite defines the Secret Tradition as (i) the memorials of a cosmic loss which has befallen humanity, and (2) the records of a restitution in respect of that which is lost. It is innermost knowledge concerning man's way of return whence he came, by a method of inward life. But, by a paradox, that method of inward life is also one of inward death. There has been no accredited system of mystery-teaching but has proclaimed, whether in legend, symbol, or dramatic representation, the fact that death, interpreted in a mystical sense, is the gate of that life which is not merely post-mortem existence, but conscious, irrefragable union with the Eternal Basis of the Universe. It may be urged, and with truth, that this doctrine is, or was intended to be, that of official public religion. I am not concerned here to discuss to what extent the churches have conveyed or failed to convey this truth in its plenitude to the consciousness of their adherents, and I am far from asserting that the collateral Masonic system can claim an advantage in this respect, But there is none among the millions who have received the degree of Master-Mason but may reflect that not only has he symbolically undergone an experience which has been the crux and centre of all the great Mystery-schools of the past, but that in so doing he has in his own person testified to a truth which is inherent in the moral fabric of the Cosmos itself.

And herein lies the peculiar purpose and value of ceremonial initiation as against systems that are but didactic or mainly so. The doctrine imparted is given an immediately personal application. The imagination of the disciple is intended to be impressed through his being identified with, and made to enact ceremonially, that which it is essential for him to learn, to the intent that thereafter he may in his own life and consciousness become that which he has sacramentally portrayed.

Such being the nature and purpose of arcane rites, Mr. Waite, who appears to be in the probably exceptional position of being personally familiar with the entire range of those now extant, as well as with the records of many now in desuetude, has been enabled in this book to apply his well known qualifications as a mystic to collating them and assessing their respective values; a laborious task conducted with unflinching skill and tact, for in dealing with matters to which covenants of privacy attach he has been confronted upon one side with the difficulty of avoiding saying things to which those obligations would apply, and, upon the other, with that of saying too little to render an important subject intelligible to the non-Masonic inquirer. This twofold problem he has effectually surmounted. Faithful in respect of those matters which are the private prescriptions of secret communities, he has been abundantly generous in his exposition of those which exceed the range of all the instituted systems and can never become the monopoly of any since they are open to humanity at large. For this reason, although those who are officially Masons will in virtue of their inside knowledge stand at an advantage, the book need in no sense be deemed as restricted to their consideration, but is, meant for a far wider public. The Mason of whatever rank will receive from it an illumination perhaps little suspected as possible in regard to his own science, which is now, and for the first time, subjected to an exegesis never hitherto undertaken; whilst the non-Mason who may be interested no less than his initiated brother in the development of mystical knowledge and philosophy, and the forms in which these have found expression from time to time, will find ample scope for profitable instruction and reflection.

Space does not avail here for detailed reference to the contents of Mr Waite's book, or to the interesting collection of illustrations of cryptic symbols and of portraits of some of those who have been conspicuously associated with the expression and transmission of mystical doctrine and rites, and of which a few are here reproduced. The two volumes themselves constitute an extremely handsome setting to an unique work which, as a Mason myself, I most gratefully

welcome and commend to my brethren and all others whom it may concern as the most important contribution to Masonic literature that has hitherto appeared. I have preferred in this notice of it to limit myself to emphasizing a conviction of its value and to indicating the fact that it must needs mark an epoch in the history of a system which has developed as it were from a mustard-seed until it has overgrown the whole earth. Masonry in some at least of its grades may be, as Mr Waite shows, an imperfect expression of the Secret Tradition, and the average Mason may, and doubtless does, enter into but an incomplete understanding of the full content of his system even as imperfectly expressed, although reasonable excuses for his so doing might perhaps be advanced. But the present work should make such excuses henceforth impermissible, and for this reason it may be destined in time to assist in transforming and elevating the whole conscience and motive of the Masonic body. In a system which hitherto, with so intangible and obscure a reason, has developed as Masonry already has done there lie, now that that reason is unveiled and a new motive is displayed, enormous possibilities; and in this regard I am thinking less of its future numerical strength than of the augmented spiritual stature of its adherents.

Masonry may yet become an undreamed of power for good, especially when regard is had to the increasing decadence of the churches and the vapidness of their teaching. Connected with its future is the problem, already becoming urgent, of the admission of women, against which there is, of course, no a priori or other substantial objection. The natural conservatism inherent in vested interests and arising from long usage may eventually dissolve when a fuller realization of what is involved is attained. Upon the continent a few lodges are opening their doors to women, whilst the Co-Masonic movement working in connection with the Theosophical Society already numbers some dozen lodges admitting both sexes. Of this latter movement Mr. Waite speaks somewhat impatiently, but rather because of its reputed supervision by an elusive entity described as the Comte de Saint Germain than from prejudice against feminine rights to participate in mystical rites and philosophy. In the words of the apostle-initiate, the man is not without the woman, nor the woman without the man, in the Divine Idea, and, besides abundant precedents from antiquity, there are good warrants for associating them together in any system whose ultimate goal is the conscious realization of that Idea. There was once, it may be remembered, a building-which, through the mouth of a great prophet, was rejected and condemned by the Great Architect because it had been "daubed with untempered mortar."

My references to Masonry in this article are, like Mr. Waite's book, not meant to be restricted merely to the Craft grades and their extension, the Royal Arch; they extend to Masonic grades and cognate rites lying beyond these, and some of them are entirely beyond the range of the average Mason's present vision. Those whose existence is a matter of public knowledge are, as Mr. Waite observes, analogous to what in former days were known as the Lesser Mysteries. But as beyond these there subsisted the more withdrawn and Greater Mysteries for those who were proficient and well equipped, so also, we are assured in these volumes, the corresponding form of the latter is amidst us to-day. It is of the Masonic method and the initiatory system as a whole that I have written, and if in what is here said I have done less than justice to the important volumes under notice, the deficiency is due to a desire to exhibit in the space at my disposal the standpoint from which they should be read. They form the greatest contribution in the way of expository literature that Masonry has received. It remains now with the Masonic Fraternity — and with doubtless many eager inquirers outside of it — to take advantage of them and to enlarge their borders of understanding in regard to a momentous and underestimated subject.