

# The French Rite: Bearer of the Enlightenment Cultural Flame

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## ABSTRACT

The first Grand Chapitre (Grand Chapter) of the French Rite was constituted in a very official way on February 2, 1784. This was the first governing body of higher degrees in France.

Just as Freemasonry is the heir to the Enlightenment, there is no doubt that Enlightenment philosophy directly inspired the French Rite. Dogmas and despotism were discarded, while new concepts such as critical thinking, religious tolerance, secularism and emancipation were advocated, paving the way for democratic and Republican values.

**Keywords:** Grand Chapter, French Rite, culture of the Enlightenment, critical thinking, religious tolerance, Secularism, Emancipation, Cosmopolitanism, Universalism

## El rito francés: portadora de la llama cultural de la Ilustración

El primer Grand Chapitre (Gran Capítulo) del Rito Francés se constituyó de manera muy oficial el 2 de febrero de 1784. Este fue el primer órgano de gobierno de grados superiores en Francia. Así como la Francmasonería es heredera de la Ilustración, no hay duda de que la filosofía de la Ilustración inspiró directamente al Rito Francés. Se descartaron los dogmas y el caciquismo, mientras se defendían nuevos conceptos como el pensamiento crítico, la tolerancia religiosa, el laicismo y la emancipación, allanando el camino a los valores democráticos y republicanos.

**Palabras clave:** Gran Capítulo, Rito Francés, cultura de la Ilustración, pensamiento crítico, tolerancia religiosa, Laicismo, Emancipación, Cosmopolitismo, Universalismo

## 法兰西礼仪：启蒙运动文化火焰的承载者

1784年2月2日，法兰西礼仪（共济会）的第一个总会所（Grand Chapter）以非常正式的方式成立。这是法国第一个管理更高会员等级的机构。正如共济会是启蒙运动的继承者一样，启蒙运动哲学无疑直接启发了法兰西礼仪。摒弃了教条与专制，提倡批判性思维、宗教宽容、世俗主义和解放等新概念——为民主价值观和共和价值观创造了条件。

关键词：总会所，法兰西礼仪，启蒙运动文化，批判性思维，宗教宽容，世俗主义，解放，世界主义，普世主义

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Freemasonry appeared in the wake of the Enlightenment, in a more favorable religious and political context than that of previous centuries, in 1717 or 1721 in England, after monarchy by divine right had been replaced by parliamentary monarchy and the partial emancipation of religious dissidents.

The Enlightenment emerged in the Netherlands, England, and Scotland before spreading to France and other European countries, and Enlightenment thought ranged from the radical to the moderate, to use the terminology deployed by historians.

Lodges affiliated with the first Grand Lodge, known as the Grand Lodge of Moderns from the 1750s onward, had a minimal ritual practice, which primarily consisted of reciting “catechisms” for each degree during initiation or when advancing from one degree to another; these fairly simple rituals drew symbolically on builders’ tools (such as the compass, square, plumb, level, and trowel). As this was an

oral culture, the rituals were not written down, but instead learned by heart. It was not until the “exposures” (the revealing of secrets starting with Prichard in 1730) that rituals became fixed and more easily passed on, in France in particular. For this reason, anyone seeking to understand the ritual practice of the lodges needs to rely on speeches from the time as much as on the rituals themselves: welcome speeches given during initiations, the inaugurations of Grand Masters and Provincial Grand Masters, and stone-laying ceremonies for public buildings. These speeches give us insights into the principles that underpinned Freemasonry in the eighteenth century.

In France, blue lodges practiced a rite similar to that of the Moderns’ lodges. As for the higher degrees, these were practically non-existent in England at that time, apart from a few exceptions of which much has been made; in France they grew and multiplied in a highly random and disordered manner.

It would therefore be fruitless to look for a formalized, precise ritual for these higher degrees.

What is indisputable is that the first Grand Chapitre (Grand Chapter) of the French Rite was constituted in a very official way on February 2, 1784, and that this was the first governing body of higher degrees in France. This implies that there were French Rite chapters in existence before this date. The Amitié (Friendship) Lodge, to which Roëttiers de Montaleau belonged, certainly already practiced the higher degrees of the French Rite. The French Rite probably began to be practiced in the higher degrees at the same time that the Grande Loge (Grand Lodge) became the Grand Orient de France (GODF) (Grand Orient of France), so from 1773 onward.

Today, it seems more pertinent to study the values behind rituals rather than trying to date them. Following this approach, there is no doubt that Enlightenment philosophy directly inspired the philosophy of the French Rite, as will now be demonstrated.

### **Enlightenment philosophical culture yesterday and today: From the rejection of dogma to critical thinking**

**L**ittle by little, the Enlightenment replaced the concept of natural law, i.e., divine law, with the concept of natural rights. In the previous century, humankind was considered to have no freedom of choice or action, and was simply the puppet of divine

will. Spinoza and John Locke, followed by many English, Scottish, German, and French thinkers, cast aside these preconceptions, encouraging people to use their own understanding, to favor reasoning over blind faith, and to exercise their own critical judgement.

In the literary, scientific, philosophical, and political domains, writers freed themselves from censorship and dared to express themselves, even if there were still some limits on freedom of expression.

Like the philosopher, Bahrtdt, and the philosopher and founder of the Illuminati, Weishaupt, Kant encouraged people to reach maturity by freeing themselves from the influence of others.

Carl Friedrich Bahrtdt (1740–1792), a German doctor of theology and professor of philosophy, initiated into the Grand Lodge of England around 1777 in London, and attacked by Barruel, gave a very clear definition of Enlightenment thinking in 1787 in his essay “What is Enlightenment?,” which starts with a veritable paean to liberty, recognizing man’s right to happiness:

1 - The freedom to think and to judge is the only true source of all human Enlightenment, and without these freedoms there is no way to train our minds.

2 - The Enlightenment is the essential origin of all human happiness: true happiness is not possible without Enlightenment and the more a man becomes enlight-

ened, the more his capacity to be happy grows.<sup>1</sup>

Kant, in a passage that is too often reduced to the final injunction “*Sapere Aude*,” “dare to know,” encourages people to grow and develop themselves by using their reason and thinking for themselves. This is how he defines Enlightenment:

*Enlightenment is the human being's emancipation from its self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to make use of one's intellect without the direction of another. This immaturity is self-incurred when its cause does not lie in a lack of intellect, but in a lack of resolve and courage to make use of one's intellect without the direction of another. “Sapere aude! Have the courage to make use of your own intellect!” is hence the motto of enlightenment.*<sup>2</sup>

Here is Weishaupt, leader of the Illuminati, once more: “Why should it be impossible that the human race might reach the highest level of perfec-

tion, the capacity to rule themselves? Why should one be eternally led, who knows how to lead themselves? Is it therefore impossible for the human race, or at least the majority of people, to become adults in time?”<sup>3</sup>

People were encouraged to reason. Several other authors of English Masonic speeches use the metaphor of geometry, going so far as to speak of moral geometry, in order to inform Masons of the virtues toward which they should strive. This is very close to the geometer's mind, first mentioned by Pascal, but greatly clarified by Voltaire: “Nowadays, I believe, we might call *the geometer's mind* the methodical and reasoning mind.”<sup>4</sup>

Once it is established that each human being has the capacity to evolve, to improve themselves through education and the use of reason, it becomes self-evident that there is no shame in seeking earthly happiness. Humans have the right, almost the duty, to work joyfully. Sociability and conviviality are at the heart of both the Enlightenment and of Freemasonry.

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1 See Charles Porset's excellent biographical note, “Bahrtdt, Charles-Frédéric (1740–1792),” in *Le Monde maçonnique des Lumières (Europe-Amériques & colonies): Dictionnaire Prosopographique*, ed. Charles Porset and Cécile Révauger (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2013), 1: 189–95; and Jean Mondot, ed. and trans. (from German to French), *Qu'est ce que les Lumières?* (Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2007), 96.

2 Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?,” in *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace and History*, ed. Pauline Kleingeld, trans. David Colclasure (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 17.

3 Adam Weishaupt, “Adresse aux candidats *Illuminatos Dirigentes*,” in *Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?*, ed. and trans. Jean Mondot (from German to French) (Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2007), 37. Translator's note: Our translation. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign language material in this article are our own.

4 Voltaire, *Philosophical Letters, or Letters Regarding the English Nation*, trans. Prudence Steiner (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2007), 119.

In what ways can the French Rite be seen as part of this school of thought? When Roëttiers de Montaleau and the Chambre des Grades (Chamber of Degrees) codified the degrees of the French Rite, their motivation was to simplify and clarify, considering that the richness of a rite came neither from an accumulation of details, nor a jumble of symbols, but from the transparency of its message. In order to be comprehensible and teachable, the rite needed to be structured: this is why the French Rite only includes seven degrees (three + four), as well as a fifth order, corresponding to the original eighty-one degrees.

In its initiation ceremony, the French Rite foregrounds the symbolism of the stages of life. Each man or woman is encouraged to grow and to reach, through their own efforts, their own age of reason: to become an adult, just as Kant and the Illuminati encouraged people to leave childhood behind and take responsibility for themselves.

Brothers and sisters are invited to use their critical faculties, to carry out a personal research project, without tutoring or mentoring, simply put, to emancipate themselves through their own judgment. Everyone must stand up and speak. However, people cannot live alone, being social animals, as the Enlightenment thinkers demonstrated. This is why they must educate themselves in a mutual way, through connecting with one another. The art of conversation, which in Enlightenment times meant this very sort of interaction between individuals, and was expressed

through sociability and conviviality, is highly valued in Freemasonry. In the French Rite, collective work is the constant companion of individual progress.

### **From Enlightenment religious culture to secularism**

Prior to the Glorious Revolution, England had known centuries of religious persecution, and in France the Edict of Nantes had been revoked, resulting in the exile of numerous Huguenots, including the family of Jean Théophile Desaguliers. Finally, however, the tolerance advocated by John Locke won out and the climate became favorable to the establishment of lodges. The advent of havens of religious tolerance such as these met with almost immediate disapproval from the Pope, and the infamous papal bull of 1738. This explains why reason and religion are considered compatible in England and antithetical in the Roman Catholic world, to the point where Voltaire, initiated into the famous Neuf Soeurs Lodge, wanted to “crush the loathsome [Catholic Church].”

Margaret Jacob has ably demonstrated the cross-pollination between John Toland, Robert Collins, Jean Rousset de Missy, the pantheists, the free-thinkers, and the first lodges in the Netherlands and in England. In his *Pantheisticon*, John Toland praised the Socratic society of pantheists, who shared convivial meals, whose religion was cheerful and not gloomy like that of the Catholics or Calvinists: “You may perceive that their Religion is simple,

clear, easy, without Blemish, and freely bestowed, not painted over, not intricate, embarrassed, incomprehensible, or mercenary; not luring Minds with silly fables, and ensnaring them by the Filth, Inhumanity or Ridicule of Superstition.”<sup>5</sup> An anonymous treatise of 1743 defined a “philosophe” as any thinker who turned away from God and took a greater interest in society. Bernard Picart, author of the first iconographic representation of Masonry in volume six (1736) of his magnum opus, *The Ceremonies and Religious Customs of the Various Nations of the Known World* (of which the first volumes started to appear in 1723), placed all Western and Eastern religions on the same footing and gave significant importance to Freemasonry.

In the same spirit, in 1723 and 1738 James Anderson only required Masons to believe in that religion which united them, rather than setting them against one another, leaving everyone freedom of choice unless they were an atheist—certainly a sizable restriction, but one that must be seen in context. Religious dogmas and rigid theological precepts were rejected in favor of a latitudinarian religion that gave people freer rein in their beliefs. Thomas Paine, a friend of Nicolas de Bonneville and the author of *On the Origin of Free-Masonry*, who cannot be shown to have been a member of any lodge, recommends his Masonic friends turn to the religion of the druids rather than the revealed religions that imprison them with dogma.

There is only space for religious tolerance when philosophical doubt, which relies on reason, is permitted.

The French Rite has been built on this basis of tolerance, from Roëttiers de Montaleau onward. In 1877, Frédéric Desmons managed to drive through a major change in Article 1 of the GODF constitution, replacing the requirement to believe in “God and the immortality of the soul” with freedom of conscience, which some years later (1884) became “absolute freedom of conscience.” The Great Architect of the Universe did not disappear from the constitution, but this phrase was gradually abandoned by the French Rite over the course of the twentieth century. In fact this notion, which was a step toward increased tolerance in the eighteenth century, was later coopted into a transcendental principle, and into the recognition of a single God in the monotheistic tradition. While Anglo-Saxon Freemasonry still requires a belief in God, and therefore allegiance to a dogma, what is known as “liberal” Freemasonry, in the sense of fundamental human liberties, espouses absolute freedom of conscience. In the French Rite, Grand Maître (Grand Master) Phillippe Guglielmi, today the Très Sage et Parfait Grand Vénérable du Grand Chapitre Général (Most Wise and Complete Worshipful Master of the General Grand Chapter) has championed a new and very clear label, “adogmatic Freemasonry.”

At the start of their meetings, all lodges and chapters within the French

<sup>5</sup> John Toland, *Pantheisticon: Or the Form of Celebrating the Socratic-Society* (London: Cooper, 1751), 94–95.

Rite proclaim their allegiance to the Republican principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, to which they add secularism, the contemporary manifestation of Enlightenment religious tolerance.

### **From Enlightenment political culture to emancipation and the Republic**

**I**n England, it was the simultaneous rejection of absolute monarchy and Catholicism following the Glorious Revolution of 1688 that permitted the Enlightenment and Freemasonry to blossom in a calmer political and religious context.

The American Revolution was inspired by these principles a century later, rejecting the despotism of George III and his desire to subject the thirteen colonies to unfair economic and political laws. The number of lodges doubled during the American revolutionary period, while the inverse occurred during the French Revolution some years later. Of course, it would be untrue to assert that Freemasonry has always embraced emancipation, and today we know that some Freemasons were proponents of slavery while others were abolitionists. While in England the most prominent abolitionists were predominantly evangelists and Methodists, the figure of Freemason Victor Schœlcher, architect of both the 1848 Republic and the abolition of slavery, dominated the debate in France.

British and American Enlightenment figures were little affected by republicanism, unlike their French coun-

terparts, whose ideas culminated in the French Revolution and the declaration of human rights. However, it is the Scotsman Andrew Michael Ramsay, not himself overly partial to political republicanism, to whom we owe the superb formulation: “The whole world is but one great republic, of which each nation is a family, and each individual a child.” Ramsay was orator of the Grande Loge (the future GODF) when he gave his famous speech, which he delivered twice, in 1736 and in 1737. It was above all the Illuminati, whose radicalism worried many Masons, including George Washington, who established cosmopolitanism as a Masonic virtue.

In order for Freemasonry to develop, a minimum threshold of democracy must be reached. We know that in times of repression and tyranny, when freedoms are being removed, Freemasons have always been among the first victims. No-one can forget the Second World War, or more recently the events in Chile. What is happening in Russia and Ukraine is a matter for journalists, as historians cannot yet achieve the necessary distance from events.

Masonic orders are not immune to the diplomatic divides that separate peoples. This is not the place to study the nature of the divergences between Anglo-Saxon Freemasonry and Latin Freemasonry. Let us therefore focus on our central theme, the French Rite as bearer of the Enlightenment cultural flame.

The Grand Chapitre Général wanted to promote the development of the French Rite worldwide, by encour-

aging new Grands Chapitres to find their own feet and set out under their own steam, while retaining fraternal links with one another.

In Lisbon on April 25, 2011, a *Charte des Principes Fondamentaux du Rite Français* (Charter of Fundamental Principles of the French Rite) was signed by seventeen Grands Chapitres Généraux from France and around the world, later joined by other Grands Chapitres Généraux. Today there are thirty Grands Chapitres Généraux of the French Rite worldwide. This charter affirms the liberal and adogmatic principles of Freemasonry, namely absolute freedom of conscience for all Freemasons under the French Rite. Ramsay meetings are a way for those Grands Chapitres of the French Rite that have signed this charter to meet regularly.

Enlightenment culture is at the heart of our democracies, of Freemasonry in general, and in particular of the French Rite. However, it would be imprudent, even irresponsible, to put

on blinkers and pretend that these values are not under attack. Enlightenment culture, a culture of religious tolerance that in France is called secularism, has been threatened many times in the last decade. Aggressive forms of nationalism have tried to expunge Enlightenment universalism.

Some have used Enlightenment weaknesses, weaknesses that in general can be attributed to the historical context, such as the rejection of atheists, the exclusion of women and all those born into slavery, and discrimination along ethnic lines, in order to reject Enlightenment thought wholesale. There is no need to leave our critical faculties behind and rhapsodize about the Enlightenment. Instead, we should hold firm to its fundamental approach, to the values that can and should inspire our modern democracies. This Enlightenment culture is essentially tolerant and universalist, emancipating men, women, and entire peoples. The French Rite is steeped in this culture, and continues in that tradition.