

Universal Freemasonry

by Michaël L. Segall

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Dear listeners of "The Grand Lodge of France is Speaking", I would like to talk to you today about the concept of universality insofar as we, Masons, are concerned. One often hears people speak about Masonic universality and universal Freemasonry, just as one speaks about Masonic "universalism." Circles hostile to Masonry or afraid of it (which is often the same thing) take advantage of these terms to imagine the essence of I don't know what plot, woven for obscure reasons at a planetary scale, possibly with the purpose of taking control of the world, separately or with the complicity with the Jews, the Protestants, the Catholics, the rich, the poor, the communists, the socialists, the conservatives or the liberals.

By the way, I would like you to observe that one has been talking about this famous plot for at least two - or two and a half - centuries. Had it been real, the Masons as well as their alleged accomplices would seem to be terribly ineffectual plotters, as they have never managed to take control the world, not even of the world, not even of a single country!

This having been said, it might be good to understand why Masonry claims the title of "universal", to know what meaning it gives these words and if Masonic universality - or universal Masonry - actually exists. Finally, and should it really exist, it would be good to know its aims and usefulness.

The concept of universality is not very ancient in Freemasonry. It surely didn't exist at the time of its Operative ancestors. This concept appears a little, between the lines, at the very beginning of the 18th century, at the time when the first Constitutions of Freemasonry written by an English protestant minister, a certain James Anderson, were published. In those Constitutions, he alludes to the notion of universality by saying that, to become Masons, men should share "that religion in which all men agree, leaving their particular opinions to themselves; that is, to be good men an true, or men of honor and honesty, by whatever denominations or persuasions they may be distinguished; whereby Masonry becomes the Center of Union, and the means of conciliating true friendship among persons that must have remained at a perpetual distance."

Even if that remains true to this very day, the concept of universality will not attain its world-wide dimension, even though rather vague, until the beginning of the 20th century. This universality - or this universalism - are just as vague nowadays, at the moment I'm speaking. To understand what it is we are exactly talking about, it must first be understood what the words "universal", "universality" and "universalism" really mean in a Masonic context. Is "universal" something which spreads out to everything, to everyone, everywhere, which

covers everything, which includes everything. For instance, a universal theory in science. Universality is the characteristic feature of what is universal, general or in widespread use, such as the current universality of the English language, or the universality of human characteristics, good or bad.

Inasfar as universalism is concerned, and that is true about all words in ism, matters become more complicated. Historically, the word "universalism" has two very precise meanings. In political philosophy, it is a term designating the ideas of those who admit no other authority but universal consensus. A kind of consensual anarchy, if you wish. In theology, it is the opinion of those who think that God wants the redemption of the whole of mankind. You will notice that neither of these two classic interpretations of the word has anything to do with Masonry.

Masonic universalism represents either the opinion of those who wish that the entire world might share the ideals of Freemasonry which, this way, might spread world-wide, or the opinion of those who think that all Masons throughout the world should be in a relationship of mutual amity and fraternity (which is not wholly obvious nowadays) or, finally, the desire of the great majority of Masons to see the various Masonic groups which constitute Freemasonry unite, if possible in the whole world but at least in each of the various countries, including ours.

All this because we must realize that, no matter what most people are thinking, Masonry does not exist in the entire world. Dictatorships, whichever they might be, leftist, rightist or religious, have never tolerated the existence of any groups urging harmony among people of all nations, all origins, all religions, even all political opinions, and which would only ban extremisms and extremists.

One must also realize that Freemasonry is not a worldwide organization, monolithic, having a common hierarchy and marching in step towards a common and well-defined goal. Since its appearance in the 15th or 16th century, in a form similar to Operative Masonry, then with its foundation in its current form in 1717, it has split into hundreds, possibly thousands of independent groups and bodies calling themselves Grand Lodges, Grand Orients, Grand Easts or Masonic federations. Most countries possess at least one but often a dozen or more. There are currently 12 in France, 18 in England and up to 50 in every state of the USA. Some of these groups maintain among them friendly, even affectionate ties. Some others accept each other without much enthusiasm. Others ignore each other or stare blankly at each other. Luckily and despite this, individual Masons themselves, no matter the state of the relations among the hierarchies of their various groups, actually consider each other Brothers and maintain in their various countries and across borders the warmest ties, in the context urged nearly three centuries ago by James Anderson.

Where, then, would be that universal, world-wide, tentacular, secret and mysterious Freemasonry, powerful, plotting and hegemonic, allied to other supposed forces just as obscure and occult, and about which one talks so much? Nowhere, save in the fertile imagination of certain authors of pop literature and certain politicians at the extremes of the political spectrum. Unfortunately for Masons and their friends, happily for its enemies, Masonry is not universal and has never been, for better or worse. It is on the other hand and doubtlessly universalist. What does that mean?

Essentially, that Masons ardently hope for two things: Firstly, to get better along with each

other in the national and international sphere, later (or at the same time) to be able to help all of mankind to solve its problems otherwise than by employing the kalashnikov or the bazooka. Because the basic aim, the whole purpose of Masonry is, beyond better understanding and attempting to improve oneself, human fraternity, honesty, sincerity, understanding, brotherly love and tolerance towards the others, whatever their origins, their religion, their social status, the color of their skin, their wealth or lack thereof.

It is the availability, the sympathetic ear, the friendly touch, sometimes intellectual or even spiritual but in any case fraternal and warm which has always existed among true Freemasons everywhere, in everyday life as well as in their ritual meetings, that Masonic universalism would like to propagate throughout the world. Granted, the various Masonic bodies don't get yet too well along, but individual Freemasons are doing much better. And if the peoples and the countries of the world would get along just as well as the Freemasons do, the world would be a much better place to spend one's life!

So this is, dear listeners, what I can say, in ten minutes, about universality and universalism in their strictly Masonic context.

See you soon again!