

The French Connection

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Bon jour mes Freres! Vous Francois? Mai oui! Masonry est. Franco-English, n'est pas?

What I just tried to communicate via my lousy French was: Good day my Brethren! Do you speak French? But yes! Masonry is French-English, is it not?

What is this about French-English? Our heritage is the Grand Lodge of England by way of Americanization of the York Rite of Freemasonry, is it not? Well, of course it is! But where did the Grand Lodge of England originate? That is a vast topic of its own, supported by written histories, oral traditions, discovered artifacts and confiscation (or confusion).

The study of Masonic genealogy fills books. Many, many volumes documenting facts and theories. But that is not today's topic. Instead, I want to shed a little (Masonic) light on what I call "The French Connection."

There are many theories and suppositions that link Masonic origins with French roots, including but not limited to possible connections with the Knights Templar. But there are other, more substantiated relationships with the French that are indisputable. And the proof is in our ritual. More specifically, the language.

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Again, the story of our ritual language would be a monumental task, taking years and volumes of books to document it. So let's just focus on a small, but important part of it. The French Connection, not that the French Connection is small, it's huge. But we're just going to look at a small part of it.

To start with, about the time Masonry was getting off the ground in England, the French were assimilating culture into the English. The French were more "refined." Language was one of those areas that the French were much better developed in than the English. Hence, the English absorbed a lot more French than the other way around.

But why is this important? Because as human beings in a society we are conditioned not only to communicate ideas with language, but our very thought processes are shaped by words and syntax. Many abstract and concrete thoughts are made possible only by being identified and defined as concepts. Think of it like this: Which is easier to build, a wall made out of mud, or a wall made out of bricks? And which is probably stronger? If we think of ideas expressed as solid bricks which we call words it is easy to see how they can be stacked, arranged, and adjusted to support and strengthen each other. The wall in this example could be an expression of ideas.

Without words, we would have no laws, histories, or poetry; the very things that define us as human in society.

As I said before, the French were well ahead of the English in this arena, and the very words that enabled the concepts of freedom and equality, Masonic bedrocks, were made possible by French influence. Does this mean that without the French language these thoughts wouldn't have evolved? No, of course not, but as history would have it, the French happened to be in the right place at the right time to have been the catalyst for

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this line of reasoning when Masonry as a philosophy was forming. To recognize and acknowledge this stage of Masonic development is in itself monumental, and it affords and merits deep contemplation and consideration.

But what about the proof I mentioned, within the language of the ritual? As anyone who has studied Masonic ritual knows, there are many antiquated words and patterns of speech within it. One reason for this is that our ritual is descended from an earlier time, and language, which evolves, has changed to the point that the ritual now sounds dated. It is like reading Shakespeare. And this is true; however, it must also be considered that the original authors of the ritual purposely wrote it to reflect a reverence for its heritage and roots. To this extent they very deliberately incorporated into its many words of old French origin, often paired with an Anglican equivalent.

Some examples of these pairings with the French word preceding the Anglican:

- Duly and truly
- Promise and swear
- Cable and tow
- Conform and abide

And some with Anglo Saxton word followed by the French equivalent:

- Freewill and accord
- Hele and conceal
- Parts and points
- Worthy and qualified

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And other words of French origin that play an important role in Masonic language:

Lodge, Mason, Masonry, Master, Apron, Compass, Square, Trowel, Level, Plumb, Advance, Mysteries, Apprentice, Charity, Faith, Progress, Travel, Science, to name a few.

The words Travel and Mysteries have such a rich heritage that they could each be an extensive study unto themselves; easily enough material for a couple of separate presentation talks, far beyond what I've done today. Quite frankly, all I've done today is scratch the surface of this subject and possibly shined a light in a dark corner of our past.

There are many other "French Connections" as well. The timing of the French Revolution and the rise of the French Philosophers are a vast study unto itself.

If you have an interest in pursuing this subject I highly recommend the small digest entitled Vistas of Masonry by Brother Raymond Burnette Pease, PHD. It is a brief but highly concentrated presentation of observations of the Masonic language. Although it is very clear and understandable, it is a slow, careful study, not a light read. But it is well worth the time and effort to consider it.