

What place for liberal freemasonry?



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The creation of a new lodge is often a challenge and always a gamble. It is a challenge because it requires that a group of individuals accept the constraints and duties that will make the group a living entity. From the moment it is conceived, a lodge lives through a sometimes-uneasy marriage of idealism and pragmatism. It is also a gamble because brothers come and go, affinities evolve, unexpected difficulties arise, the initial enthusiasm of some may turn to discouragement or disillusion, and not least because the survival of the lodge relies on the continued good will and commitment of future generations. Will the initial vision of the lodge's founders continue to inspire in years to come? Will inspiration continue to overcome doubt and weaknesses? Our new lodge, *Freedom of Conscience*, is, in this sense, a fairly typical lodge.

There is little doubt, however, that our lodge has its own specific set of challenges. Although the French Grand Orient has already had a presence in London for over a century, some will no doubt see the appearance of an *English*-speaking lodge as a provocation. We will encounter indifference, prejudice, perhaps even hostility. Because there is indeed a certain degree of provocation in our project, but only in the sense that we propose an interpretation of freemasonry that is different to that generally understood in this country. Our critics will claim that we are simply not freemasons at all.

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We belong to a masonic tradition that shares some features with so-called regular freemasonry, but that is also at odds with it in a number of significant ways. We value the idea of Man as a perfectible, autonomous, but in essence social creature, capable of living a morally straight and constructive life independently of religious influence. We have no requirement to believe in a Supreme Being, and both atheists and believers have their place in our lodges. We also believe that fulfilment and happiness on a personal, individual level can only be achieved in a democratic and fair society built on solid humanistic foundations, and likewise that a healthy society can only develop from responsible citizens capable of "thinking on their own feet". In this perspective, we see little distinction between working to improve ourselves personally and purposefully apprehending the problems of society around us. Both exercises are two inseparable sides of the same coin.

We associate freemasonry explicitly with the pursuit of this dual objective: to improve both Man and society, rather than with pure introspection bathed in symbols and ritual,

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although symbols and ritual retain an important role in guiding that endeavour. The work of the freemason, not only outside but also within the Temple, consists of directly engaging with all issues that touch on humanistic values through discussion and, if necessary, through action outside our walls. We want our freemasonry to address societal issues “hands-on” because they are our most tangible working material. This vision of freemasonry is admittedly not shared by the vast majority of freemasons in the world, who do not see in freemasonry this social and political dimension.

There is, however, nothing new about this controversy. The very first Grand Lodge founded in London in 1717 was one of the few institutions that, in the spirit of the Enlightenment, sought to unite men, be they protestants and catholics, in brotherhood. The emphasis was on leaving personal religious opinions aside and, instead, on celebrating “that religion in which all men agree”. In its own historical context, this stance was a bold political statement. However, it quickly attracted criticism and derision from traditionalists who claimed to uphold a more genuine brand of masonry, with a stronger emphasis on religious belief and a strict observance of “ancient charges”.

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The question of what is freemasonry and what it’s not remains contentious to this day. As with all other kinds of conflicts, the search for conciliation and consensus is always commendable. However, freemasonry teaches us not to see consensus as the only acceptable outcome of a disagreement. We must not only accept but welcome disagreement, seek to understand the perspective of he who differs from us and to appreciate him for it. Because we believe that, in the end, a bigger truth exists that transcends all quarrels.

The creation of our new lodge is motivated not by competition but by the conviction that we may find enthusiasts for our specific masonic style. When all is said and done, the basic mission of a lodge of liberal freemasons always remains simply: to provide a protected space where humans of all origins and creeds may come together and, through discussion and exchange, better understand our common humanity.

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