

History of Belgium's Freemasonry : Progress and Secularism

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In the purely hypothetical case where an English freemason would be visiting what I would qualify as an average Belgian lodge, he would perhaps recognize a number of elements in the ritual used over there, but beyond that point there is a good chance he would have the feeling of having stranded on a different planet. The fact of being on the continent might be into that for something, but obviously that is not the heart of the matter. Indeed, over the centuries, freemasonry in countries like Belgium, France, and a number of others has known a very specific evolution which eventually gave it a character having rather little in common with Anglo-American freemasonry or the Masonic bodies related to it. One might even ask if its initiating features are always covering exactly the same thing. There have been days that this continental variety sometimes referred to as “Latin” freemasonry (i.e. because of the Latin-derived languages these countries share) was said to be no more than a “deviation” from the one and only genuine brand, which evidently was the English one or the ones recognized as “regular” by the United Grand Lodge. For a number of reasons (we can come back to later on) this kind of anathema seem to make room for a more understanding approach, where due account is given of the historical circumstances explaining this other way of living freemasonry. In stead of “good” or “bad”, “genuine” or “deviated”, a certain evolution in the direction of the acceptance of “otherness” seems to make its way. As it is generally the case, posing the most simple of questions, i.e. the question of why things happen to have become the way they are, is the crucial step to take and to go beyond prejudice. My talk of today will have no further ambition than to try and answer that question, at least to offer a number of elements constitutive of a valid answer. So, no apologetics or polemics, no pleading for or against, but contextualising and understanding.

A first remark that has to be made is that freemasonry in Belgium is older than the Belgian state. Indeed, when Belgium became an independent country in 1830, freemasonry was a thriving society since about 80 to 90 years. If the foundation of the first lodges often remains rather badly documented, it is clear nevertheless that this initiating society had been imported from different countries. Some lodges derived directly from English freemasonry, others were founded by freemasons powered by French or Dutch obediences. In 1770, a first provincial

grand lodge was founded for what were then still the Austrian low countries, but that was only a weak structure. The essential of Masonic life was to be found in the local lodges, of course, and they were clearly doing well. It is important to understand why that was the case. It would be completely wrong to see their success as a kind of marker of a developed enlightenment culture in the provinces that eventually were to become Belgium. I am not saying that the Austrian low countries were obscurantist, filled with reactionary nitwits: although intellectual life was still quite provincial, books and theatre plays by enlightenment authors like Voltaire were relatively widely available for example, but that does imply that lodges and freemasons were more inclined than others to show this particular cultural consumption. Although adequate research is lacking for the period, there are no clear indications that in this respect masons were really different at that time than other people with similar social backgrounds. If one looks at the records of 18th century low country lodges, their activities –at least the ones outside initiations and the like– look pretty boring indeed, that is to say: the fun was to be found after the lodge meeting, in the meals, the collective drinking and singing. So the lodges of our Austrian period do not appear as the spearhead of enlightenment, they were certainly no “*sociétés de pensée*”, to use the particular concept of Augustin Cochin, but appear to be mainly what another French author, Maurice Agulhon, qualified as “*sociabilités*”, polite meeting places for men, mainly of relatively wealthy stock.

But how then does Belgian or proto-Belgian freemasonry transform into a associations network that will very definitely act as “*sociétés de pensée*” with a progressive, secular and even an outspoken militant character? Two elements have to be taken into account here. One is the role of Catholicism. The second is the deep impact of the French revolution in these provinces. Let us start with the Catholic Church. It is well known that the pope condemned freemasonry quite early: in 1738, with the apostolic constitution “*In Eminentissimi*”, pope Clement XII excommunicated ipso facto all freemasons, notably because men of different religions could meet on the basis of equality and tolerance. Now what is so interesting about the Belgian provinces of the 18th century is that this papal constitution was considered to be non applicable there because the Austrian emperor had not given his “*placet*”, a kind of authorization which was requested to make it valid. The consequence was that the lodges were filled with practising Catholics who did not at all see their Masonic membership as problematic –even a couple of clergymen were affiliated. There are very clear indicators that the existence of the papal constitution “*In Eminentissimi*” was well known, but that these Catholic freemasons simply looked the other way, which might be an indication of a relatively

latitudinarian approach of their religion, at least for a significant part of them. Another interesting aspect is the fact that they did not mind to sit together with protestant and Jewish freemasons, who were not largely present as they only constituted very small communities in a couple of cities, but still, there are interesting examples, the lodge of Ostend for instance, where a handful of protestants and Jews were members. So, if militant defenders of Diderot and d'Holbach were rare or absent, the people who frequented the lodges at least accepted the norm of a relative tolerance. One way or another, this had to lead to problems with the Catholic hierarchy.

This was to become all too clear when the French revolution was affecting the future Belgian provinces. Here again, the historical development has been quite specific. First of all, in 1789 freemasonry had been nearly strangled because some years before Emperor Joseph II had imposed one of his reforms upon it, i.e. to concentrate the entire low country freemasonry into three lodges in Brussels, thereby killing what was then its essence, namely local social intercourse. Second, the low countries, mainly Brabant, had their own revolution in 1789, but it was more of a reactionary one, directed against some other, more enlightened reforms of that same Emperor Joseph. This brought a period of deep turmoil, which eventually led to the take-over and annexation of the region by revolutionary France in 1795. The 20 years of French rule will bring a renaissance of freemasonry (most of the older lodges which are still functioning today have been founded during the French annexation) but it will not be exactly the same freemasonry as we saw before Joseph's decrees 1786. First of all, the aristocratic element was quickly disappearing. More and more, lodges were becoming populated by bourgeois and middle classes, with a strong presence of regime officials. Everything functioned under the auspices of the Grand Orient de France, which made that the political "instrumentalising" of freemasonry by Napoleon was also to affect the Belgian lodges. In those years, tensions between freemasonry and parts of the local clergy were gradually growing and once the French cleared the space for Dutch rule in 1814-1815 these tensions would lead to a number of outright confrontations.

No doubt, the mythical association of freemasonry with the French revolution and Jacobinism, as it was made by a number of priests like the famous abbé Barruel and had been spread by books and pamphlets, was starting to produce a major rift. In the 15 years before Belgian independence, we find a couple of examples where priest-led mobs tried to sack lodge buildings, an unknown phenomenon before the revolution, but the most important new

thing was the introduction of religious sanctioning of freemasons in the Belgian provinces. This sanctioning was not imposed by the bishops –yet ...– but was the initiative of the more fanatical strands of the local clergy. It was effected through the refusal of sacraments to freemasons –who were still, I must repeat it, in large majority practicing Catholics– and most of all by the so-called “*refus de sépulture*”, i.e. the refusal of the clergy to provide a religious burial to deceased masons (making it difficult to get someone buried altogether, by the way ...), which caused an ever growing indignation and resentment in the lodges. The Masonic records of those years are most revealing in that respect. By contrast to the 18th century, an explicitly anticlerical discourse was appearing in the 1810s and 1820s. Several lodges were constituting lodge libraries where books by anticlerical enlightenment authors were definitely on the shelves. So clearly the atmosphere was changing. It is quite a paradox that in those Dutch years the influence of more radical French ideas was perhaps stronger than during French annexation. The presence of a number of rather influential French political refugees was most important in that respect and has certainly contributed to a starting transformation of Masonic life, notably in cities like Ghent and even more in Brussels. This French element did not only affect the ideas, but also the Masonic practice. What is extremely important –as it touches the core of lodge activities later in the 19th century and will remain present until today– is the introduction by these French ex-revolutionaries of speeches on non-Masonic subjects into the ritual lodge meetings, i.e. what was to become the new style “*morceau d’architecture*” or “*planche*”, an essential part of the debating culture, social and political debating culture, which will remain an essential feature of Latin freemasonry. These first talks, which they still called “*conférences*” in those days, treated rather “innocent” subjects like natural sciences, but it would not take too long before religion and politics would appear as well.

So, once Belgium became an independent country in 1830, practically all elements were present to make freemasonry not only genuinely “national”, but also very much engaged in society. I will not go into the rather difficult process of creating the Grand Orient de Belgique in 1832-1833 (indeed, 175 years ago), as this has little importance for us, but one element must be mentioned nevertheless. In spite of all what we have seen, the options of the founders were still rather “traditional”, if you will, as they did not state a political goal for this new obedience. Indeed, the article 135 of the Grand Orient’s statutes explicitly maintained the formal prohibition of political and religious discussion within the affiliated lodges. Very soon, this article would prove to be redundant in practice. First of all, a number of lodges of the

Liège province –lodges with a quite militantly liberal outlook– refused to join the Grand Orient, precisely because of this prohibition. And within the Grand Orient itself, it was all too obvious that a number of lodges were closer to the Liège-type of stance than to the traditional a-political one. This was clearly shown, immediately in the 1830s, through the escalating confrontation with the Catholic Church, for whom independent Belgium with its constitutional system brought much larger possibilities to realize its ideological and political project than the French and Dutch regimes had done. The liberal opinion would react against that and, as we will see, the lodges would eventually become the organisational backbone for that opinion. This was most eloquently shown in the educational conflict, “*la lutte scolaire*” in French, which was the first matter where a major public intervention of the Masonic bodies was to have important consequences. When the bishops made use of the newly introduced freedom of education to open a catholic university in the early 1830s, a time when it was not sure at all that the existing state universities would be maintained, what might have implied a Church monopoly on higher education, it was precisely the Brussels freemasons who gave an adequate answer to that threat. In 1834, the Brussels lodge “*Les Amis Philanthropes*” and its presiding master Pierre-Théodore Verhaegen, a key figure in 19th century Belgian freemasonry, as we will see, took the initiative to found the “*Université Libre de Belgique*” (later: “*Université Libre de Bruxelles*”), a higher education institution which still exists and which had the principle of free inquiry as its basic stance, a stance opposed to a catholic higher education project explicitly rooted in papal doctrine. For several decennia, Belgian freemasonry was the main fundraiser for this university which was and has remained essential to secular people in Belgium. If I just remind the importance of Brussels’ university for the introduction of Darwin’s ideas in a predominantly catholic country like Belgium, then it is immediately clear how important this masonico-educational project has been to change worldviews.

The Belgian bishops quickly understood the potential of freemasonry as a force opposing its confessional project and reacted vehemently, against the “*Université Libre*” of course, but also against freemasonry in general. Where they had never made public statements on the matter before, they did now, more in particular in December 1837 when they issued a collective letter to the faithful, aggressively condemning freemasonry and prohibiting Catholics to become or to stay member of a Masonic lodge –sacrament refusal again being the arm to enforce the interdict. Now this is a most interesting episode, if we keep in mind that in 1837 the large majority of Belgian freemasons, although clearly anticlerical, still were

practicing Catholics. Take Verhaegen for instance: he still went to attend mass every Sunday and he was certainly no exception. So one might expect the anathema of the bishops to empty the lodges. This did not happen. Only very few freemasons handed in their aprons. The others remained freemasons, gradually radicalized their opinions, became ever more pronounced liberals and eventually abandoned Catholic faith altogether. Freemasonry became the crucible of a broad project to oppose the Church as a political actor, and more and more as a religious body as well.

For the Belgian lodges and the Grand Orient, this had two important implications. First of all, freemasonry would involve itself directly in party politics. Second, a little later in the chronology, Masonic ritual and “doctrine” –if I may call it like that– would be largely secularized. Both were to have their effects in the broader Masonic world, as a host of other Masonic bodies did not understand the reasons behind this development and finally were to break their relationship with the Belgian Grand Orient –although that story is slightly more complicated than one usually hears, as we’ll see further on. But let us first look at this double process of politicisation and secularisation within the Belgian lodges. Almost immediately after the Episcopal condemnation, a group of prominent liberal freemasons around the same Verhaegen we mentioned before, chose a specific strategy for the future. As the Catholic Church provided for a structure leading political Catholicism, a counter-veiling power was to be created on the liberal side: in their minds, freemasonry presented itself not simply as the only available instrument of structuring liberal opinion, the Masonic ideals of tolerance and individual liberty made this option into a kind of moral duty, as they feared –not without some reason, by the way– that Catholic clericalism would pervade the country and its institutions, eventually turning Belgium’s liberal constitution into an empty shell. Political problems were to be discussed in the lodge meetings and these debates could then inspire collective action. In a first stage, a host of lodges created local electoral committees to support liberal candidates. Then, in 1846, all of these committees joined to create the Liberal Party, the first modern political party of the country. The party and the local liberal associations were profane bodies, obviously, but their synergy with the lodges of the Grand Orient was intense. When the Grand Orient abandoned its old article 135 prohibiting political and religious discussion in the lodges, a decision taken in 1854, it was already without any significance for several years.

The vendetta with the Catholic Church gradually led Belgian freemasons to cut off all links with the old faith. They stopped going to mass and started to refuse all ecclesiastical

interference with their lives. Here again, burials were highly symbolical events. Where in the 1840 for instance non-catholic burials of freemasons were more or less imposed by clergymen refusing to assist or bury masons who did not swear off their Masonic qualities, freemasons later tended to refuse themselves to have religious funerals, mainly since the 1860s, the much discussed civil burial of the eternal Verhaegen being the big event marking that break. Some freemasons became protestants in those years, but they were only a minority. Most of them kept, at least in a first stage, a vague belief in a supreme being and in the immortality of the soul. Both elements being present in the Masonic traditions, it was almost as if freemasonry became an alternative religion. But things evolved quite quickly into a more clear break with religion altogether. Even if this Masonic spiritualism remained present for a significant part of the Belgian freemasons for many decennia (mainly in high degree Masonry), more and more amongst them shifted to agnosticism and some even to atheism. Having studied 19th century Masonic funerary rituals quite intensely, that shift mainly took place in the 1870s. That was precisely the decennium when Belgian Freemasons –like their French counterparts– changed their ritual ways of working to make them more acceptable for agnostics and atheists: within the Grand Orient, the invocation of the Supreme Architect of the Universe was no longer obligatory to the lodges but merely optional, the same goes for the presence of a bible during the same rituals and finally candidates were no longer supposed to believe in the immortality of the soul.

As I suggested earlier on, it is often said that these elements led to a breaking off of the relations of the Belgian Grand Orient with the United Grand Lodge of England, but that is not correct, as there simply were no relation to break. The story is more confusing, as it was precisely in the 1870s, when Belgian freemasons were hyperactive in politics and secularised their ritual surroundings in a quick pace, that a rather loose link with the English Grand Lodge was established, incidentally in a period when a highly controversial conversion of an English Grand Master to popery –horresco referens!– seemed to incite to a temporary understanding of the motives Belgian Masons had to do what they were doing. It was only at the whereabouts of the First World War, when Belgian Masons were getting far less involved in politics than before, that the UGLE would break off relations. But let us be clear about this somewhat puzzling matter, on which Masons have discussed a lot after 1945, but which was not at all preoccupying Belgian freemasons in the 19th or early 20th century. What mattered was confronting the clerical bulldozer on the home front, and if this or that English or German or American obedience broke off relations because of options taken in that specific Belgian

context, well, 99,9% of Belgian freemasons did not give a damn. Indeed, why should they have done so?

Now, mind you, I certainly do not want to present this as a kind of heroic story. If Belgian freemasons had little other options than to fight against clericalism, this process of politicisation was highly problematic for Belgian freemasonry as such, as it did not only bring freemasonry into politics, it also brought politics into freemasonry. That might sound banal, but it is not. The relatively sharp divisions which existed within Belgian liberalism, i.e. the conflict between a “*doctrinaire*” right wing and a “*progressiste*” left wing of radicals, started to divide freemasonry as well, sometimes even more than it did the party, as the left wing was stronger in the lodges than it was in the party. The result was frequent quarrelling, the splitting of lodges, low attendance of the members, lodges leaving the Grand Orient and what have you. Belgian freemasons reacted themselves to these problems for different reasons. If a more or less general consensus had grown around the secular, anticlerical character of the Grand Orient and its lodges, if a more or less general consensus existed on the freedom of discussion in the lodges, which obviously meant that religion and politics could be treated, a fundamental divergence existed around the consequences to be drawn out of political discussions. The basic question was to be formulated as follows: can a lodge, casu quo an obedience like the Grand Orient, vote a political programme which is binding upon its members? This discussion lingered on from the 1850s up to the 1890s when, all of a sudden, the balance rather quickly tilted over to a negative answer. The principle has sometimes been called the “Belgian system” in those days and was formulated as follows: whereas politics are concerned, “*Les loges discutent, mais elles ne votent pas*”, the lodges discuss but they do not vote. And the same goes for the obedience. So, large numbers of Belgian freemasons became convinced that this was to only way not to allow politics to split freemasonry on ideological lines. That this happened in the 1890s is no coincidence. Not only is this the decennium when tax based voting was abandoned for a tempered form of general suffrage. It is also the period when a significant numbers of “*progressiste*” freemasons abandon liberalism and become active members of the Belgian labour party. In this constellation, political differences within Belgian freemasonry had become so considerable, that political consensus on particular issues had become virtually impossible, with this one exception, at least for the time being, i.e. secularism, the opposition against the hereditary enemy, Catholic clericalism. And even there things became less evident after a while. Once liberals and socialists became potential coalition partners of the catholic party in government after the first world war, even this

traditional rallying point for collective action was no longer considered to be something a lodge or an obedience could decide upon. So clearly, after world war one, the process of relative de-politicisation of Belgian freemasonry was more or less concluded.

I must add to this that Belgian freemasons did not feel easy about this, even if it actually helped to preserve their unity –for the time being. It is quite striking how frequently the post world war one discussion evolved around the theme of regaining the “old glory”, or as they called it, the “*rayonnement*” freemasonry had had in the 19th century. That “glory” was partly mythical, even if one should not underestimate the role freemasons did play in the defence of public education for instance, or in the support of general suffrage, but the reference showed clearly that it was not altogether clear what direction freemasonry had to take for the future, what use masonry would have in society if it was not to do more than just talk about the problems of the day. A late remnant of that preoccupation lingers on today in the discussions which return every now and then, at least in the Grand Orient, on the need of public statements of the obedience on important matters (e.g. against racism and right wing extremism). It is striking, in my opinion, that these public statements have remained very rare. That does not mean that social and political problems are no longer discussed upon, on the contrary, but usually they are treated as a “*société de pensée*” should do it, having profound discussions on difficult subjects, leaving it to the individual conscience of every individual freemason to draw conclusions out of what has been said for and against, perhaps the conclusion to engage into action, perhaps to do nothing at all. Some have found this quite frustrating –which explains the recurrent discussion on public statements, of course– but I am convinced this method has not remained without result. One example here, where Belgium is concerned, is the way the once difficult subject of de-penalisation of abortion has first been discussed in the Masonic lodges –already before World War One! There are many more of them: the creation of the Humanist League in 1951 was the result of discussions and subsequent action of a network of Flemish freemasons, the number of masons who are active today (benevolently of course) in public education boards can hardly be counted, the same goes for secular humanist associations for moral support of specific groups, I can also quote the engagement on palliative care and euthanasia etc. etc.

The discussions and the related differences on the issue of the social relevance of freemasonry has had some other consequences. One of them, a most important one, was the option to open freemasonry for women. The subject certainly deserves a paper on its own, but concisely I

would say that the Belgian Grand Orient has missed the train here. The development of the mixed lodges of the "*Droit Humain*" since 1911 was supported by a number of feminist men, members of the Grand Orient, but the structures as such, for too long a time, did not support the growth of mixed masonry, to state it diplomatically. Other matters were dealt with in a somewhat better way. Gradually, Flemish masons succeeded in creating lodges working in their own language and not in French. Gradually as well, Belgian freemasonry became somewhat more democratic in its social composition, the lodges being ever less an exclusive resort of the bourgeoisie, and being more a biotope of middle classes –teachers, civil servants, the professions, rather than big entrepreneurs, industrialists or the socialist or liberal political elites for that matter.

Let me conclude on a last point. As I mentioned some minutes ago, the Belgian Grand Orient at a given moment was no longer recognized by the UGLE as a regular Masonic body. This rather bizarre story has caused a number of developments in Belgian freemasonry which were no less strange. As in many other countries with a Latin type of freemasonry, a part of the lodge members wanted to regain that English recognition. It is quite striking that before the Second World War, the large majority of Belgian masons were pretty much indifferent towards the regularity issue. That has changed in the cold war years: for very diverse motives, some wanted to get back into the Anglo-American mainstream. I have the strong impression that in the cold war atmosphere a set of ideas you might qualify as "Atlantic" have had an important part in that shift. The –rather silly– equation of atheism and communism was certainly one of them. The idea that Belgian freemasonry had to go back to bibles and supreme architects made its way in certain circles, some merely inspired by the wish to restore Masonic traditionalism, others having a more political stance, with masonry becoming a part of some kind of a spiritual western alliance against the USSR and its friends. The result of it all was a split in the Grand Orient in 1959 with the creation of a new Belgian Grand Lodge that was recognized by the UGLE. But this did not last very long. The majority of the Grand Lodge members were not very different in their philosophical opinions than their Grand Orient brethren, for most the supreme architect and the like were mere symbols, not articles of faith. Eventually the Belgian Grand Lodge lost its recognition for that same reason, with again a split off as result, we are talking 1979, the creation of the Regular Grand Lodge of Belgium. So you see that a certain fragmentation of Belgian freemasonry has taken place after the Second World War, not as outspoken as in France but still. The last 20 years or something, though, we can notice a reverse tendency, not by dint of a fusion between different

“Latin”, “liberal” obediences, but by a friendship treaty which comprises all Belgian obediences with the exception of the London recognized RGLB, a rather small organisation by the way. And even there, things seem to be changing. Very recently, the Grand Masters of the Grand Orient and the Regular Grand Lodge appeared together on a television programme, both acknowledging the fact that the respective projects are not the same, one spiritual and traditional, the other rather focused on active citizenship and “*laïcité*”, but the spirit was certainly not one of hostility, which is quite a difference with the situation of 30 years ago. So apparently, in Belgium as well as in several other countries, people are leaving the older exclusive models in favour of a more pluralist approach, timidly perhaps, but nevertheless. Taken together, I see it as a sign that Belgian freemasonry is rather healthy for the moment. If something might cause troubles for Belgian freemasonry in the future, it seems to me that it is not to be found in Masonic life as such, but in shifts in the Belgian polity, which, as you know, is far from stable at this moment. But that is another story.

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