

Can Freemasonry be Secular?

Conference organised Saturday May 9, 2009 by
Hiram Lodge, Grand Orient de France, London
www.logehiram.org.uk

Secularity - Communities - Freemasonry:

A Historian's Reflection on the Belgian Case

Jeffrey Tyssens

First of all, I would like to thank the organizers for inviting me once again to have a talk with you on the past and present of Belgian Freemasonry and its particular relationship with secularism. Those of you who participated to last year's event have had the opportunity to hear a first introduction into the matter and Hiram lodge has put the text on its website. Hence, you will surely allow me to return only briefly to a number of general axes of the history of Belgian freemasonry and then go into some detail while discussing the way "laïcité" has been actually perceived until today. Quite often, French masons have a perspective on Belgian "laïcité" which is little bit too optimistic, whereas realities on the ground are far more ambivalent and the same goes for the way Belgian freemasonry relates to it. Now for those who still think we're living in the 1950s and would hope that this ambiguity with regard to secularism might imply that the Belgian lodges might be thinking to get "regular" once again, I must immediately disappoint them. Indeed, 95% of Belgian Masonry –and that is a conservative estimation– is secular to the bone, it could not be anything else, if you grab the basic strands of the country's history, but, the issue is that the relation between the state and the different religious or philosophical groups in the country is no longer homogeneously perceived in a "French" way, if you will. You could even say more, i.e. that paradoxically the defense of the only genuine conception of "laïcité", which is the French one, has been abandoned by significant parts of the secular movement, even if these parts, which I would qualify as the group of "pragmatic adaptionists", as I will later explain, do not necessarily feel very comfortable about it. Actually, most of these pragmatists would have preferred to have things differently, I gather, but then again, the particularities of the power balance within the Belgian body politic being what they are, they do not see any other option than to get into a kind of vaguely communitarian approach of their own basic strategy. Now let us be immediately clear about one thing: the Belgian Masonic bodies (i.e. the four so-called "liberal" obediences; I leave aside the regular grand lodge, who –for obvious reasons– is completely outside of this debate) have never expressed themselves on this or that brand of secularism, which allows us to observe, every now and then, that the lodges have become almost the only places where a counter discourse is still well alive. Now I reckon this all sounds still quite abstract to you, so let us try and get somewhat more into detail, and I hope at the end of my talk you'll have picture that is somewhat clearer.

First of all, let us briefly repeat a number of important historical observations on Belgian Freemasonry. As usual, the first lodges developed in the 18th century as rather successful

places of encounter and sociability, without being very much engaged on the philosophical side, let alone the political one. The large majority of Belgian brethren were practicing Catholics, be it, no doubt, Catholics of a rather tolerant brand. Papal condemnations were not applied and Freemasons ignored them. Things changed quickly, though, after the French revolution and the temporary annexation of the regions that were to become Belgium in 1830, first by France, then by the northern Netherlands. The lodges, mainly new ones created in the French period, were progressively viewed in a hostile way by the catholic clergy, notably because of Barruel-like associations made between freemasonry and revolution. We know today that this was a myth, but that did not prevent it from becoming quite popular, even amongst Freemasons themselves, who started to identify with the French revolution, at least with 1789, sometimes also with its later stages. If 18th century lodges in the southern low countries were certainly no vanguard of Enlightenment, even less of radical Enlightenment, early 19th century lodges progressively became places where liberal ideas took shape. Thus, eventually, a confrontation with Catholicism could not be avoided, even if these liberal freemasons still attended Sunday mass. A series of local incidents sharpened the edges and finally, after Belgium became an independent country with its own Masonic body, the Grand Orient de Belgique, a clear break would follow when in the last days of 1837 the bishops sharply condemned Freemasonry and prohibited their flock to be members. Significantly, only a very tiny number of masons abandoned their lodges, which is a good proof that liberal, i.e. in our case also anticlerical ideas had become deeply rooted.

These confrontations gradually made the lodges into politically active units, even if the statutes of the Grand Orient formally prohibited religious and political discussions. This traditional rule, the famous article 135 of the Grand Orient statutes, was formally abandoned in 1854, but realities were completely different already from the 1830s onwards. Hence, the implication of e.g. the Brussels lodges in the creation of liberal election committees in the late 1830s and the eventual creation of a liberal party on the national level in 1846, an initiative where Masonic networks played a major mobilizing role. A lot can be said about this politicizing of Belgian freemasonry, which we cannot do now, but we do have to remind that it provoked quite intense discussion on what the consequences might have been of these political debates *casu quo* engagements on the ground. After 1854, indeed, there was no unified view on the formal effects of this politicizing of Masonic activities. Eventually, the principle was to be accepted that a political discussion could not be followed by a vote on an obligatory program, as this would harm the freedom of opinion of individual freemasons. At the end of the 19th century, for a complex set of reasons, this phenomenon of politicizing lodges would be returned, with some exceptions, mainly where “*laïque*” activities were concerned.

However, the relative de-politicizing of Belgian freemasonry –discussion remaining possible and frequent, collective action becoming ever rarer, at least on a somewhat larger scale– brought about some kind of an identity crisis, which sometimes pops up again until today. One revealing indicator of this, was the kind of “*morceau d’architecture*” (i.e. a lecture within a ritual lodge meeting, something hardly known in Anglo-American freemasonry, but a normal way of working on the continent) where in this case the speaking brother reflected before his lodge upon the ways of regaining the societal influence of the past for Belgian freemasonry. This would lead to a rather idealized representation of 19th-century freemasonry as militant and glorious, an image which persists until today. Obviously, there

is a ground of truth in this image, important things have been done, indeed, new ideas became sort of “thinkable” through the action of lodges as “intellectual laboratories”, and this is not to be underestimated, but there are flip sides as well: severe internal conflicts, of course, but also the phenomenon contemporary masons of the continent know all too well, i.e. what in Mozart’s *Zauberflöte* is associated with another group in society, “tut wenig, plaudert viel”, “talks a lot, doesn’t do much”, something German author Heinrich Mann astutely observed in the early 20th century about Freemasonry in general.

But let us get back now to the secularity issue and have a more detailed look at what it implied for Belgian freemasons. First of all, it must be clear that the adoption of a liberal profile, even one of a more radical brand, and the parallel development of sharp and militant anticlericalism did not imply that Belgian freemasons became atheists over night. The position of Belgian freemasons and their lodges with regard to religion in se or metaphysics in general is highly complex, pluriformous, and most importantly, the actual elaboration of atheist or agnostic stances, not as a formal lodge doctrine or something of that kind, but as individual choices to be accepted as normal with freemasonry, came to the fore relatively late, at least a lot later than the affirmation of militant anticlericalism or political engagement. As I was able to show in an in-depth study of funerary rituals in Brussels lodges in the long 19th century, a Masonic spiritualism remained intact as a philosophical basis of the craft in general until the 1870s, when something of an agnostic pluralism appeared in the exegetic dimensions of lodge ritual, and even then, things were not black and white in comparison to earlier times, certainly where Scottish rite masonry was concerned, chapters and areaopagi being frequented by quite a lot of brethren. The large or even overwhelming presence in Belgian lodges of atheists or if you will of agnostics who are pretty much near to atheism is not a fact of the 19th century, it is something of the 20th century and even then it is a little bit schematic, reductive and in need of lots of qualifications. But then again, this is not the heart of the matter. What was at stake in the 19th century (and is becoming an issue again today) was the place religion could or could not occupy in the public sphere.

It should be clear that in this field the politics of freemasonry was not at all determined by its metaphysics. The most firm advocates of the banning of religion out of the public sphere were quite often no atheists at all. Our friends in France know this very well. Freemason and politician Emile Combes, whose name is mistakenly associated with the separation law of 1905, was in favor of a strict, even a harsh control of the state over religion, while being himself very much a spiritualist, believing in a supreme being, the immortality of the soul and what have you. The actual authors of the French separation law, commission president Ferdinand Buisson and one of the silent designers of the law’s essentials, Francis de Pressensé, were both Protestants, liberal Protestants, to be sure, but Protestants all the same. Similar things can be noted for the Belgian case. Eugène Goblet d’Alviella, Grand Orient grand master, supreme commander of the Scottish rite etc., author of one of the most far reaching separation favoring programs in the history of Belgian liberalism, was a protestant as well. And we can even go further. Pierre-Théodore Verhaegen, this icon of Belgian anticlerical freemasonry, attended Sunday mass almost until the end of his life, in a catholic church, if you might have doubted upon the denomination.

What then were the main focuses defined by Belgian freemasons in order to come to a secular society? Globally speaking, one can define a cluster of five fields, some of them

being consistently present, others being related to more specific epochs of Belgian history. Most of these issues have been at the heart of sharp political confrontations, sometimes even in such a way that they have become identifying, I would even say existential markers for Belgian secular people in general and Freemasons in particular, at least until very recently. If one does not grasp these conflicts and their outcome, one will surely fail to understand the deep nature of the Belgian Masonic world. Let us first sum up these issues and then go into some detail, notably on outcomes and on a number of ambiguities. First and foremost, there is the program of elaboration of a national education system where neutral schools organized by public bodies must be hegemonic and where private schools cannot claim public money. Secondly, there is the rather broad field of ethical legislation allowing individuals to determine what should or should not happen to their bodies before and after death. Then, there is the will to organize charity or later welfare through public bodies. Related to this matter, there was a long standing wish to establish a kind of strict control of what church bodies and more in particular orders and congregations could possess. Last but not least, there is the issue of the separation between church and state.

As I suggested, we must inevitably start with the education issue. I suppose it is not that easy for people living in predominantly Protestant surroundings to feel how important this issue was and up to a certain degree still is in countries which have been or still are predominantly Catholic. Heroic battles have been fought over this matter, in France, Belgium, Italy, Spain, often with civil war like effects, even when people did not actually come to arms, but only fought with words, social exclusion or for that matter with the aspergillum (“le goupillon”, as it is named in French). The basic issue is always the same: does a school serve to institute the new citizen and consequently supersede religious belongings, as the liberals or later the socialists thought, and thus also the Belgian Freemasons, or does a school serve to form believers, perhaps even obedient voters of the confessional political party, as the Catholics advanced? And then, there was the second question: is public money to be reserved for schools organized by public bodies or can public money also be granted to private, confessional schools? Yes, Catholics would say; no, said the others, at least in the beginning. Belgian freemasons were deeply engaged in these matters, first of all with the creation of Brussels University, but also on all other levels. As I mentioned last year, they were to become most active in the Belgian Ligue de l’Enseignement, the principal group defending a primary education that was to be compulsory, free and secular.

Confrontation on these matters would grow ever more grim during the 19th century and culminated in the so-called “school war” in 1879, when the liberal government with its freemason minister of education Pierre Van Humbeeck tried to introduce a legal framework that was to make public primary schools present in all municipalities (which was not the case before) and where courses of catholic religion would not be obligatory but optional (i.e. the reverse of what existed before). The Belgian bishops launched a highly aggressive attack against this law and literally ostracized every individual that refused to comply with their wishes. When the catholic party returned to power in 1884 and revenge politics were engaged for about 30 years, the seculars’ resentments of the 1879 events grew ever deeper and has since then been transmitted to the next generations. It is quite striking that in those years of confrontation several public school teachers who were targeted as enemies by the Catholic clergy became Freemasons and if that would have been necessary, contributed even more to this indefectible attachment of the lodges to the public schools. If you visit

Belgian lodges today one often hears this as a family history, where this issue has gained a particular emotional varnish as well. No wonder it became unthinkable that a Freemason or a person applying to become one would send his or her children to a Catholic school, even if political elites of the liberal and the socialist parties, Masons or not, have since long, i.e. since World War One abandoned the active defense of the traditional public school program, allowing subsidies to Catholics schools and what have you, eventually becoming accomplice to a state of affairs where the public schools have become a minority. It is only in these last years that very timidly school choice seems to become somewhat less of a vendetta-like affair, notably with regard to applying candidates, but still, the echoes of the old conflict remain very much present.

Let us pass to a second issue, or perhaps better, a set of issues which I put under the global qualification of ethical legislation. Hearing this, you will obviously think about laws concerning abortion and euthanasia and of course you are right. One can say that these problems are amongst the only ones where secular societies and freemasonry has seen its basic wishes fulfilled. Where the euthanasia problem is concerned, it is rather remarkable that Belgium is doing way better than France, even with the latter's constitutional principle of "laïcité", as the utterly painful case of Mme. Chantal Sébire has shown last year. Things have been that broadly accepted by public opinion at large that the bishops' hostility has given them a rather bad image in this respect, not the supporters of the new legislation. It would go a little too far to say that from the point of view of Belgian freemasonry "victories" have been obtained, as this would imply that de-penalization of abortion and the legal possibility (conditional of course) to chose for euthanasia are the products of the political power of Masonic bodies. This is not the case. Certainly where abortion is at stake the relatively late de-penalization was the product of a long evolution, perhaps more within the Catholic world than the secular one, and where the late acceptance under law rather indicated the relative political weakness of Belgian secularists. These ethical issues thus appear to be mostly recent matter, but there is more to it, as problems of self-disposal were at stake in the 19th century as well. Long before abortion, let alone euthanasia, have become debatable questions, the disposal of one's mortal remains, i.e. the right to be decently buried without ecclesiastical ritual, or, at the beginning of the 20th century, to have one's remains incinerated, were important conflict matters, even if today they have largely been forgotten. I will not go into detail, as I touched upon this question in our previous conference. Suffice it to say that eventually the secular stance has prevailed, first of all through a secularization of graveyards, later and with far more difficulties by the voting of legal provisions making incineration possible, even if for a long time financially unattractive. In recent decades social attitudes have changed in this respect as today even Catholics opt in large numbers for cremation. For a historian this is quite ironical if one knows how the combat in favor of optional cremation was lead by prominent freemason Georges Tosquinet and his Amis Philanthropes lodge and was directed against the Catholic bishops who were opposed to what in a polemic leaflet of one of their edition houses was still qualified in the early 1930s as the "barbecuing" of corpses.

The third and the fourth matter I evoked, i.e. the related questions of who can or must organize charity or later welfare and the problem of ecclesiastical or perhaps more specifically congregational possession seems a little bit more dated, as they do no longer raise passions as they did until the first world war, more or less. The question deserves a brief mentioning though, as they were most important in the political mobilizing of Masonic

lodges in the 1850s and the strengthening of the liberal party. What they mobilized against, was the so-called “cloister law” of 1857 (“la loi des couvents”, in French), a Catholic attempt to grant legal standing to charity funds, allowing them to become benefactors of gifts and heritages. This caused an enormous havoc as liberals and freemasons feared this would foster the mortmain (or “mainmorte” in French) of ever larger possessions in the hands of socially ever more powerful congregations and thus engage a kind of return to the “Ancien Régime”, a collective fear which existed in a very similar form in France by the way. Led by Freemason politicians like Verhaegen, supported by an unseen lodge militancy, the liberal forces attacked this project most vehemently and succeeded in ousting the Catholic party from office for many years, leaving it with a serious hangover on the matter: indeed, for a long time, it did not dare to come back to the matter, not even during its 1884-1914 homogeneous governments. This last observation makes all the more revealing when and how this question was ultimately solved. Indeed, it is again in the immediate aftermath of world war one that “secular” politicians, more than once freemasons themselves, gave in on this type of matters, thus eventually supporting a Catholic solution as a kind of compensation.

Compensation for what, you might ask? Well, for the introduction of a number of important reforms traditional historiography has always presented as being major socialist victories wrought from the Catholic party in a climate of leftist revolutions throughout Europe, i.e. general male suffrage and the lifting of the famous article 310, the last penal restriction on the right to strike, at that time a considerable impediment on the growth of socialist trade unions. But things were somewhat less glorious than that. When writing my PhD, I was able to prove that socialists and liberals in 1919 more or less paid for the introduction of general suffrage by accepting new state grants for catholic schools. And in a recent research project I am co-sponsoring nowadays, we are discovering that the Catholic party succeeded in performing exactly the same trick with regard to their foundations, congregations etc. in 1921. The socialists got their abolition of art. 310, for sure, but they were made to give in, through their minister of Justice at the time, Brother Emile Vandervelde, member of Amis Philanthropes, president of the second international, socialist icon if any, ... to give in on this old legal standing issue, more in particular by presenting a law installing the ASBL (“Association Sans But Lucratif”), i.e. a most flexible law providing Non Profit Organizations with legal personality, thus allowing all the congregations and what have you to do exactly what they did not succeed to do when these other brethren opposed them, some six decades earlier.

This was most important with regard to the secularity of society, as this Non Profit Organizations law was most instrumental in the more global strategy of Catholicism at large since the end of the 19th century, not of fostering mortmain of course, but of re-conquering Belgian civil society through processes we would later conceptualize as “pillarisation”. In such a “pillarized” system, the newly emerging social tasks of the state –no longer charity provision, but social welfare– are largely outsourced to intermediate structures of a private nature but who find themselves to be recognized and subsidized by that same state. These intermediate structures have a political color; they are even intimately linked with existing political parties. They are essential in organizing almost entirely the social and cultural lives of their members within the boundaries of one, clearly defined ideological world qualified, as we said, as a “pillar”, which is considered essential in fostering political loyalty to the party with whom it is integrated. Belgian Catholicism has been incomparably effective in this

register: its doctrine of “subsidized liberty” spread throughout society and would eventually prove to be, for the Catholic pillar, a far more efficient tool of social control than the pulpit. Now, the surprising thing here is not that Catholicism designed this clever strategy to cope with secularization of society (a secularization which was, in those days at least, more mythical than real), but that those who could expect to profit from that secularization process actually collaborated to institutional reforms that were made to nullify secularization’s potential effects. It is even more surprising that Belgian socialist and liberal political elites of those early decades of the 20th century were actually in large part composed of Freemasons, who paid lip-service to secular ideals before world war one but very quickly forgot about it once they could participate to government, during and after the cataclysm. This explains why secular forces finally appeared as politically impotent, why Belgian Freemasonry eventually became, in political terms, the lame duck it still is today.

Once you have understood this mechanism, it is easier to grasp why the position of Belgian secular societies at large and Belgian Freemasonry at their sides are in a rather ambiguous position where “laïcité” is concerned, “laïcité” being understood in the strict acceptation of the term, i.e. an essentially legal concept of separating state and religion strictly, the state not recognizing nor subsidizing any religion, while guaranteeing freedom of religion or philosophical opinion, approaching individuals as citizens, not as believers or non-believers. All the rest, I am thinking of this set of crappy adjectives linked to the concept in recent French debates, has only one objective, and that is of emptying the concept of its actual meaning. I do not want to force people to be in favor of this “laïque” conception of society, of course, but if one is not, then, for the sake of the clarity of the debate, one is politely asked not to use the concept “laïcité”, if one is in fact defending a disguised communitarian view of society. But let us not rush and have a look first at where things were standing at the conception of the Belgian state and the growth of this liberal freemasonry we met in the 19th century. First of all, the Belgian political system of 1831 was not a republic but a constitutional monarchy. Monarchy, no republic, no reference to the French revolution either, hence no basic compatibility problem between the basic legitimacy of the political system and Roman Catholicism, a big difference with e.g. France’s Third Republic. Secondly, the 1831 Belgian constitution is sometimes said to respect a strict separation of state and church, but I do not consider this evaluation to be completely correct. Indeed, state authority does not intervene in the internal affairs of churches and respect religious freedom, but a number of churches have been recognized and provided for with state money since 1831, the constitution thus introducing a kind of heritage of Napoleon’s 1801 concordat within the institutional frame of the state. This was not “laïcité”, of course, this construction with its cult budget (the “budget des cultes” ...) had nothing to do with separation, a fortiori when one studies the actual translating of the constitutional principle in everyday’s financial realities of past and present, where the Roman Catholic church was structurally advantaged, even if other, smaller religious communities could up to a certain level profit from the system as well. And then we do not even mention other symbolical and less symbolical elements of the position of the Catholic church which did give it the status of a de facto state religion (obligatory courses in public schools, Catholic masses celebrating official festive days in presence of the constituted bodies, judges, the military etc., the practically complete control of graveyards, public health provision and so forth).

For quite a long time, this was tacitly accepted by Belgian liberals, be it then with some grinding of teeth here and there, most of all within the radical wing. Traditionally, these

radicals or “progressistes”, as they were more frequently called in Belgium, were disproportionately present in the lodges, although their weight in the actual party associations was never sufficient to determine party options and push moderate and doctrinaire liberals towards really daring options, be it that even these moderates or doctrinaires, Masons or not, gradually became irritated by the stances defended by specific fractions of the Catholic party which they considered to be challenging the basic principles of the Belgian constitution, the sacred cow of even the most un-radical of liberals. Did this lead to a serious consideration of a separatist program within Belgian Freemasonry specifically or with the Belgian liberal party at large? The global picture was rather complicated, but there were some first signs of a radicalization process going into that direction. The well known papal condemnation of liberal constitutions were certainly not followed by the majority of Belgian Catholics, the conservative and constitutional wing of the party keeping the upper hand, but in the 1860s and 1870s the ultramontane wing did grow and certainly within the episcopate it had a considerable appeal. The quasi theocratic options of this tendency were feared to be undermining the constitutional regime and that would lead even the doctrinaire liberals to harden their positions. Hence, in the 1870s lodges and liberal associations started considering a political program of actively banning Catholicism out of the public sphere. The “progressiste” wing was quickly evolving in a separatist direction (the ideas would become central for the free thought societies), but this vision did not determine the eventual common program of the different strands of liberalism in the late 1870s, a program that would be the base of the electoral victory of 1878 that led to the school war a year later. Indeed, the relative secularizing of public schools was the basic trust of this program, but the scheme remained rather moderate: a timid shift to a kind of denominational neutrality of public schools, religion courses optional instead of obligatory, an exclusively secular teaching staff, not much more actually. This was far removed from the radical program Freemason Goblet d’Alviella proposed in an April 1878 essay he published in the *Revue de Belgique* (with e.g. hard measures against mortmain, limitations of the cult budget etc.), although these ideas had a certain potential. Indeed, the fanatical reactions of the bishops against the Van Humbeeck law and the moral civil war that resulted from this confrontation was to sharpen liberal attitudes at large. This would even lead to a temporary breaking of diplomatic relations with the Vatican. So one might wonder what would have happened if the liberal party would not have lost the 1884 elections or the later ones? This is mere speculation, obviously, but it is quite likely that the country would have evolved in a completely different direction.

Anyway, 1884 brought an electoral landslide in favor of the Catholic party and this constellation would not change until 1914. Then, the First World War and its aftermath brought a “union sacrée” where left politicians started to form coalitions with the Catholic party and progressively abandoned their secular or anticlerical stances, as we saw. Secular societies and the freemasons who were most of the time in charge of these were now lacking structurally all effective transmitting belts towards the political scene. Implementing a 1905 style separation program in this new Belgian context had become a highly unrealistic perspective and although it took a while, this program was eventually abandoned. After the Second World War, a group of freemasons belonging to Flemish lodges mainly took the example of the Dutch humanist league, started favoring a less anticlerical and more ethical stance and in this way prepared a major political shift. Instead of requesting the separation of state and church (implying the abolition of the cult budget), secular organizations, which,

as I said, were most of the time led by Freemasons, started demanding equal treatment. They started to present their organizations as a “community”, talked about “la laïcité organisée”, which wanted to see itself recognized under the same constitutional principles as the different churches and consequently get its share of the money. To justify this funding, the structures would provide so-called “moral services” to their specific secular humanist community (whatever that might mean, “moral services”, if ever somebody was actually in demand of those services). In 1980 a provisional law indeed responded to this demand and in 1993 constitutional reform included the so-called “non-confessional community” in the group of fundable ones, the principle being dealt with in detail by a law voted some years later. Masonic lodges are not integrated into this system, but as I mentioned before, the number of freemasons implied in the system through the federative bodies covering the different secular societies is quite considerable.

Has this system any relationship with “laïcité”? Of course not. This is merely an implementation of a time honored principle contained in this good old English expression “if you cannot beat them, join them”. One can understand why this option was taken –what else was there to be done? – but I am not that sure that this major strategic turn has been thoroughly considered (30, 40 years ago, that is). First of all, the funding of this small secular community with some tidbits of the cult budget could only become the perfect alibi for the continuing large financing of the real profiteers of the system. Secondly, one had not foreseen the gradual transformation of the secular societies into some kind of a miniature pillar with all linked consequences (bureaucratization, pocket sized authoritarians becoming employers, absence of genuine internal discussion, etc.) without actually being in a position to get real advantages out of it, e.g. by having a serious impact on really important matters such as education or health care, where the Catholic pillar is today more dominating than it was 30 or 40 years ago. Thirdly, the transformation of the old secular societies from reflection groups into management driven units (getting the money, employing the staff, running buildings etc.) has weakened its impact within what the French would call “le débat citoyen”, the citizens’ debate, if only for one reason, i.e. that “laïcité organisée” has squandered its main arguments against contemporary communitarian deviations, religious ones as we know, as it is participating itself in the communitarian logic . You cannot have the cake and eat it, do you? This “laïcité organisée” is no longer an innovative force in society, in my opinion; it is inevitably becoming a rather conservative one, I am afraid.

Now just one concluding question. Did this have consequences, negative consequences for Belgian freemasonry? I do not think so, in the end. Freemasonry as such did not join the system, it kept its apron clean, and it remained a forum of genuine debate, where communitarian tendencies of all kind could be openly contested. The lodges have been amongst the sole places where this whole recognition thing, for instance, has been systematically criticized. The Belgian lodges are about the only places where I at least hear a principled defense of the classical concept of “laïcité”. This is important. Even if you could say that Masons talk too much and do too little –which I do not think is entirely true, by the way– this “talking”, when it is a real debate, a citizens’ debate that is, is essential to keep Freemasonry socially and politically relevant.