

The Origins of Freemasonry and Occult Practices in Relation to Reformation Thought

The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland's Century 1590-1710, by David Stevenson
(Cambridge University Press, 1988) xvii, 246 pages, index.

In this study of long neglected Scottish evidence, Stevenson, a Reader in Scottish History at the University of Aberdeen, pushes the history of freemasonry back a century earlier than standard accounts. The effect is to de-emphasize the English 18th century developments, such as the founding of the Grand Lodge in London in 1717, and place the genesis of this secret fraternity in the context of the Scottish Reformation and the struggles of the Covenanters. Even further, the fact that the most interesting Mason of the 17th century, Sir Robert Moray, was a Covenanter general, and that one stream of influence on freemasonry was the hermetic Lutheranism of the Rosicrucians (which was present in the military arm of German protestantism) should make us re-examine the goals and methods of this generation of reformers.

First responsible for the transformation of what was still basically a trade guild into an esoteric society was the royal master of works William Schaw, apparently a “moderate”, i.e. unprincipled, Roman Catholic. “Apparently” is a key word here as much of what Stevenson’s can discover about him is inferential. His office of Master of Works put him in charge of all royal castles and palaces, and acting in that capacity and as warden of the craft of “maister maissounis within this realme” (p. 34) he issued statutes regulating the mason’s guild. The first Schaw Statutes in 1598 tightened admission requirements, excluding semi-skilled workers and emphasizing record keeping and procedure. The Second in 1599 not only expanded lodge government procedure but also specified that lodge wardens were subject to presbyteries for discipline of their members, although the lodge actually carried out the trials and accepted the fines. Here also appeared the presumed first reference to non-trade secret lore as a test of admission: “the art of memorie and science thair of”. Stevenson notes:

Indeed, one of the most extraordinary features of the emergence of the masonic lodges and their rituals and secrets in seventeenth-century Scotland is that the church, not noted for its tolerance, did not denounce them as subversive and inconsistent with true religion—in spite of the fact that the founder of the movement, William Schaw, was a Catholic. Yet 50 years were to pass before any sign of worry about masonic activities is recorded in church records, and even then the matter was soon forgotten. (Stevenson, pp. 50-51).

Readers of Otto Scott’s *James I: The Fool as King* will recall the great expectations which Protestant Europe held for the new ruler when he assumed the throne in England. By these hopes Scott measures the Stuart failure. Stevenson places these expectations in the context of the occult craze in Germany at the time. The Rosicrucian order, supposedly founded by Christian Rosencreutz (probably actually an allegorical figure), drew its name partly from Luther’s coat of arms with its rose from which a cross emerges. Arising from Lutheran mystics and a partly cleaned up Hermeticism (believed to be the secrets of the Ancient Egyptians) the Rosicrucians expected the dawn of a great new age.

Soon the aspirations of the supposed Rosicrucians became closely associated in many people’s minds with hopes for a protestant crusade in Europe. Frederick V, the Elector Palatine, emerged as a protestant champion, and in 1613 (just before the Rosicrucian excitement burst on Europe) he had married Elizabeth, daughter of James VI and I whose

greatest kingdom was England, the land of the red cross [of St. George] and the red rose [the Tudor symbol]. (Stevenson, p. 100)

But Protestant hopes were to be frustrated in the 17th century.

Stevenson's chapter on the Renaissance contribution to masonry is a good introduction to the Renaissance pursuit of magic and the occult. Here also the theme of special interest to us, how Neoplatonic occultism was integrated with Christianity, is sketched out. The Hermetic Egyptian religion was linked to Christianity by its alleged prophecies of the coming of Christ and by as many parallels as could be found, thus giving it the aspect of an imperfect forerunner of Christianity.

In a time of intense and dangerous religious conflict Hermeticism also provided an escape religion.

Protestant reformers claimed to be bringing new purity of religion to Europe, and in seeking pure religion in the distant past (early Christian times) their outlook can be related to the Renaissance appeal to the past in general, and to the Hermetic search for ancient spiritual wisdom in particular.... Faced with endless conflict between Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and with deep splits within protestantism, leading to widespread religious persecution and bloody religious wars, some turned their back on fanatical conflicting dogmas and retreated into intensely personal religion which required no outward form through public ritual or worship.... The insane world of religious conflict could be rejected in favor of personal piety based on works thought to be far older, and therefore arguably purer, than protestantism or Catholicism. (Stevenson, p.84)

We need not detail Stevenson's speculations on the specific route by which Hermetic speculation entered freemasonry, whether through a disciple of Giordano Bruno, or the alchemy endemic to the court of James VI. But even here the church issue presses forward. Alexander Dickson, a supporter of Bruno's was called before the general assembly of the Church of Scotland, not for his Hermeticism, but for attending mass. He seems later to be in the camp of the radical Protestants.

Not covered by Stevenson, a second source of enthusiasm for the esoteric was apocalyptic Lutheranism. Along with Luther's rediscovery of the gospel came the sense of a crisis marking the approach of the last times. The fact that Lutheran doctrine had met decided opposition in parts of Europe, and that even where it was accepted the majority of people did not reorient their lives toward holy living convinced many that the next event was to be the judgement of God bringing an end to history. In Luther's own belief this did not include the whole apocalyptic apparatus of Antichrist and Beasts as we know it today from the premillennialists.

The prevailing medieval view had been that the advent of the Antichrist was still in the future. ... His reign would be a clear sign of the approaching Last Judgment. But for Luther and the entire early Protestant tradition, the Antichrist was not a person yet to appear but an institution that had already been active and gaining power for centuries. Thus in the place of medieval efforts to predict the biography of the Antichrist, Protestants stressed study of the history of the papacy. (Robin Bruce Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis: Apocalypticism in the Wake of the Lutheran Reformation*, Stanford University Press, 1988, p. 43)

Though the theology that closely followed Luther did not believe in the unveiling of a personage, a ruler, who would be the Antichrist bringing on the end of the world, there had been an unveiling of the *identity* of the Antichrist, as the institution of the papacy. For "the revelation of the Antichrist was of central eschatological importance. It meant that the Last Days had arrived. Through his

discovery Luther clearly identified his own age as that of the final persecution of the true church.” (Barnes, pp. 43-44)

Given this general conviction that they were living in the Last Days, books and pamphlets began to appear detailing the signs and omens of the end, and making predictions about dates of the end. As predictions failed, new writings appeared with corrections and updating the predictions, in short something like the type of literature we have experienced over the last century coming from the Dispensationalists. This literature went through various fads and phases. Barnes, in *Prophecy and Gnosis: Apocalypticism in the Wake of the Lutheran Reformation*, covers these in detail with explanations of the schemes proposed by representative writers.

Given the beliefs of the time, such prophetic speculations invariably attracted writers who were interested in the astrological implications of the Last Days. Surely there were signs and portents in the heavens, which added evidence that the last times had arrived and also provided a more specific chronology. Not that the astrological development was accepted by everyone:

The art [of astrology] flowered throughout the sixteenth century despite the well-known attacks of Pico della Mirandola and others and despite continual doctrinal disapproval. Calvin flatly opposed astrology; Catholicism had long frowned officially, though ineffectively, upon it. Luther regarded it neutrally at best, and often discounted it as a practice full of superstitions, errors, and potential abuses. Yet later in the sixteenth century, Lutheran Germany was probably more fully given over to the study than any other part of Europe; there was at least no place where astrological interest was greater. (Barnes, p. 141)

Besides this, Luther was an Ockhamist, and “his opposition to such methods was a traditional Christian position that sought to defend God’s freedom against any form of determinism.” (Barnes, p. 47) After Luther’s death his opinions were much less a retraining factor, and Melanchthon published lectures on astrology.

Where there was astrology there would be mysticism and magic. From about 1586 to 1588 Giordano Bruno was at Wittenberg and taught at the university.

How is it that such a profoundly unorthodox thinker could spend two years at the very center of Lutheran Germany, and later express nothing but admiration and gratitude? ... If the professors at Wittenberg had reports of his lectures or were familiar with Bruno’s work at all, they were certainly aware that he pursued a profoundly magical form of thinking. Yet the magician himself made it clear that he had found here far more polite attention and a much kinder reception than he had received at French and English universities. (Barnes, p. 183)

Part of the explanation, Barnes, suggests is that the apocalyptic expectations were proving to be elusive, and more insight from new sources was welcome. “Indeed, the more elusive the secrets of the Last Day became, the more attractive the bold speculations of the magi appeared.” (Barnes, p. 185) Also Luther’s breakthrough in theology suggested that other new breakthroughs in knowledge were possible.

[T]he apocalyptic notion of revelation in the Last Times led to a more explicitly gnostic emphasis on saving knowledge as insight into universal and divine mysteries. The quest for a high and hidden magical insight could easily grow out of a Lutheran desire for prophetic certainty. As Daniel 12:9 stated, the secrets were closed up and sealed until the time of the end. Now was that time. (Barnes, p. 215)

The Lutheran influence, then, on the spread of occult science, was that it was harmonious with the Reformation, despite Luther's own views to the contrary.

Stevenson's chapter on the career of Sir Robert Moray is a fascinating study of the personal faith of the most important early mason. Moray, the quartermaster-general of the covenantor army, along with the artillery general Alexander Hamilton, joined the Edinburgh lodge in 1641. Moray later served with the French and was captured by imperial forces, spending his captivity in Bavaria studying science and Hermeticism under Jesuit tutelage. Firmly on the King's side by now, he involved himself in royalist plots against the parliamentary forces. He married the daughter of Lord Balcarres, a collector of alchemical and Rosicrucian manuscripts. Following the restoration Moray became a fixture in court, helped found the Royal Society of London in 1660 and served as its first president.

In 1649 some concern about the secret Mason Word was evident in the Scottish Kirk and the presbyteries were consulted by the general assembly, with what result is unknown. A mason, James Ainslie, was chosen as minister by the session of Minto in Roxburghshire in 1652 and the presbytery felt it necessary to consult the neighboring presbyteries. Kelso presbytery replied

that to their judgment ther is neither sinne nor scandale in that word because in the purest tymes of this kirke maisons haveing that word have been ministers, that maisons and men haveing that word have been and daylie are elders in our sessions, and many professors haveing that word are daylie admitted to the ordinances. (Stevenson, p. 127)

How the lodges and the churches arrived at this state of coexistence Stevenson can only speculate. He theorizes that the reformers had driven symbols and rituals out of the Kirk, and not only from the Kirk but from the medieval guild brotherhoods whose religious aspect was extirpated. A substitute for the felt need for communal ritual and symbol developed and was tolerated in the lodges where there were no elements of Roman worship or religious symbols which the church would identify as subversive.

Religion being "off limits" to the masons, if this argument is accepted, they were left with Christian morality and ideals of brotherhood. Thus the emergence of freemasonry in seventeenth-century Scotland as a system of morality illustrated by symbols, allegories and rituals does not indicate any precocious deistic or tolerant attitudes to religion, but simply acceptance that the lodge was not a valid place for masons to indulge their (orthodox) religious inclinations in. But of course, in the long term, this exclusion from the lodge of open commitment to any one brand of religion opened the way for the adoption of heterodox ideas and the admission of members with divergent religious beliefs. (Stevenson, pp. 123-124)

A parallel holds, Stevenson argues, to civil government functions, where ritual, pageantry, musical instruments and visual arts, all banned from the church, were allowed to continue.

"Second sight", the ability to know future events through visions of them, was attributed to Scottish highlanders, but also came to be associated with masonry. In view of the widely credited prophetic gifts of John Knox (see David Chilton's article on Knox in *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, Vol. 2, Winter 1978-1979, p. 205), did the church leaders feel they needed to go lightly on this topic?

Stevenson's book makes evident the need for a parallel study of Scottish church leaders and theologians to uncover elements of their views bearing on Hermeticism, secret fraternities, oaths, clairvoyance and other matters where the modern Reformed are in clear opposition to freemasonry. Have we failed to notice serious flaws in the theology of the period, or did the church of the Covenanters compromise its avowed principles in this area? Can such a study help us to understand the larger historical problem of the failure of the Reformation in the seventeenth century—its losses to the Counter-reformation and its internal collapse to heresy, secularism and infidelity?

A brief look at the Puritans completes our review of the presence of occult and esoteric practices in Reformed circles. John Winthrop the Younger (1606-1676), was the son of the famous John Winthrop who participated in the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and served as its governor for twelve years. The younger Winthrop was educated at Trinity College, Dublin and, in law, at the Inner Temple, London. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society, and served as governor of Connecticut. Winthrop's participation in alchemy and magic is well documented. (Walter W. Woodward, *Prospero's America: John Winthrop, Jr., Alchemy, and the Creation of New England Culture, 1606-1676*, Omohundro Institute and University of North Carolina Press, 2010) He was considered by other alchemists of his time as an authority, and carried on a correspondence with experts in England. Winthrop believed that there was both white and black magic. Both were disciplines which required great knowledge to master. He did not believe the accusations in the witch trials that were going on at the time because he thought that the simple people targeted by the accusations could in no way have the mastery of magic that they would need were the accusations true. Therefore he tried to block such proceedings when he could safely do so. Besides magic Winthrop practised alchemical medicine, which he could do more publicly.

The degree to which English Puritans were open to alchemy and magic is hard to gauge. During the Cromwell era, they practised censorship, shut down the theatre and banned some literary publications. Yet there was a flowering of publications of occult and alchemist books, suggesting that the Puritans were not adverse to this.

The difficulty in evaluating alchemy and allied practices is that they were not distinguished from chemistry, physics and science. Nor were these sciences clearly distinct from the related technologies. Scientists, inventors, and magicians could all be elitist and secretive about their crafts in the same way. See, for example: Bruce D. White and Walter W. Woodward, "A Most Exquisite Fellow" — William White and an Atlantic World Perspective on the Seventeenth-Century Chymical Furnace', *Ambix*, Vol. 54, No. 3, November 2007. pp. 285-298.
<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/148642982.pdf>

Looking at this from the other side, for Reformed theology to address this, it needed more than a systematic theology in the narrow sense. Also necessary was a philosophy of science, one which could distinguish between proper investigation of God's creation, and magical and occult pursuits. What in fact eventually did the job did not come from Reformed thought but instead was the emerging mechanistic science of the seventeenth century. While there are some who view this desacralization of the world as inimical to Christianity, it was needed to separate Christianity from paganism, and if the distinctions could not come from the theologians, it was well that science supplied them. Mechanistic science was the friend of Christianity until it developed its own metaphysics of a world autonomous from God with the internal, inherent properties of matter generating the order of the world. In so doing, science became implicitly religious and a rival to Christianity as a comprehensive understanding of reality.

Freemasonry has continued into our time and still practices its rituals and teaches its beliefs. No doubt some of its members believe these teachings. For others it has a social side. This side, especially in the nineteenth century, provided a safety net where people could turn to fellow members for help in times of trouble, which was not then available from the state. For the sort of people who joined the masons, this was also preferred over any assistance network that the churches might supply. It could equally have a corrupt aspect where fellow masons could assist each other surreptitiously in business and legal matters, granting masons a special advantage. This was regarded as a sufficient threat to an open society as to produce an Anti-Masonic party in nineteenth century America.

The churches continue to be inconsistent in their attitude toward masonry. For example, some Reformed churches of Dutch background have banned membership in masonry, but the reason seems to be not so much the occult teachings, but to be the same as that for forbidding membership in some labor unions, namely existence of a membership oath forming a sort of brotherhood, which is seen by the churches as in conflict with the oath of church membership and the idea of Christian brotherhood. Other churches do object to the masonic doctrines. Finally most churches pay masonry little regard, as though it were a harmless, if silly, pastime.