

Masonic Enlightenment

*Sir Knight Benjamin F. Hill, Knight Templar Cross of Honor
Grand Commander, Grand Commandery Knights Templar of Virginia 2020*

Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path. I have taken an oath and confirmed it, that I will follow your righteous laws. I have suffered much; preserve my life, LORD, according to your word. Accept, LORD, the willing praise of my mouth, and teach me your laws. Though I constantly take my life in my hands, I will not forget your law. The wicked have set a snare for me, but I have not strayed from your precepts. Your statutes are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart. My heart is set on keeping your decrees to the very end.
(Psalm 119: 105-112, NIV)



French philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, was one of the most influential thinkers during the Enlightenment in the Eighteenth Century.¹ Dr. John Theophilus Desaguliers, a noted Newtonian experimentalist and Curator of the Royal Society, was most influential in shaping the form 18th Century Freemasonry was to take.²

The term “enlightenment” and its application toward humanity is being used in conjunction with the *Age of Enlightenment*, something altogether different from our modern American use of the term. The Western European *Age of Enlightenment* or the *Age of Reason* so called because of the explosion of knowledge, science, and access to those tools that brought forward many of our modern inventions and ways of thinking. It was an intellectual movement of the late 17th and 18th Centuries emphasizing reason and individualism rather than tradition. It was heavily influenced by 17th-Century philosophers such as René Descartes, John Locke, and Isaac Newton, and its prominent exponents include Immanuel Kant, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, (Francois-Marie Arouet) Voltaire, and Adam Smith.

The *Age of Reason* was the *World of Ideas* and dominated a wide-range of Enlightenment thought, including:

Rationalism the idea that humans are capable of using their faculty of reason to gain knowledge. This was a sharp turn away from the prevailing idea that people needed to rely on scripture or church authorities for knowledge.

¹ *Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1777)*, Jams J. Delaney, Niagara University, www.iep.utm.edu/rousseau

² *The Royal Society, Fraternal Review*, Southern California Research Lodge, April 2018

Empiricism promotes the idea that knowledge comes from experience and observation of the world.

Progressivism the belief that through their powers of reason and observation, humans can make unlimited, linear progress over time.

Finally, **cosmopolitanism** reflected Enlightenment thinkers' view of themselves as actively engaged citizens of the world as opposed to provincial and close-minded individuals. In all, Enlightenment thinkers endeavored to be ruled by reason, not prejudice.

The Enlightenment took hold on most European countries, often with specific local emphasis. For example, in France it was associated with anti-government and anti-Church radicalism; in Germany, it expressed a spiritualistic and nationalistic tone; in England and Scotland, the governments mostly ignored the Enlightenment leaders. The *Age of Enlightenment* was preceded by and closely associate with the scientific revolution.

Freemasonry was in its early years in the 17th and 18th centuries. European Renaissance and Enlightenment was an intellectual and philosophical movement that dominated the “*World of Ideas*”³ in Eighteenth Century Europe—it was the “*Century of Philosophy*”⁴. Modern Freemasonry was under the influence of Masonic reformers James Anderson, John Desaguliers, Elias Ashmole, and John Montague the Second Duke of Montague. Albert Pike, a Masonic philosopher and reformer of the Ancient & Accepted Scottish Rite, and Albert Mackay, Masonic author and scholar, both influenced American Masonic thinking on the Ancient Mysteries, Symbolism, and Cabalistic Numerology. Brothers Walter Leslie Wilmshurst, Arthur Edward Waite, and Manly Palmer Hall were Masonic authors and lecturers who devoted their time and talents to the fields of philosophy, comparative religion and psychology and their influence on Freemasonry. These were among the early leaders that set the foundations of modern masonry.

Most historians put the beginning of the *Age of Enlightenment* between 1650 and early 1700s. This is also the period when many Operative Lodges in England, Scotland and Ireland were accepting “speculative” masons into its rolls. As Speculative Lodges grew, Freemasonry provided a powerful force on behalf of liberalism in Europe from about 1700 until the 20th Century. It expanded rapidly during the Enlightenment among powerful aristocrats, politicians, intellectuals, artists, and political activists reaching practically every country in Europe. During the *Age of Enlightenment*, Freemasons

³ *A World of Ideas: Essential Readings for College Writers*, Lee A. Jacobus, St. Martin's Press, 1986

⁴ *A Century of Philosophy*, Hans-Georg Gadamer, The Continuum International Publishing Group, New York, 2006

comprised an international network of like-minded men promoting the philosophies and ideals of the Enlightenment and encouraged its members to pursue lives filled with integrity, honesty, and love for all humankind.

The Royal Society originated on November 28, 1660, when a group of philosophers and scientists met after a public lecture at Gresham College, London. Two of the original members of the Royal Society – Sir Robert Moray and Elias Ashmole – were already Freemasons by the time the Royal Society was formed.⁵ As membership of Masonic Lodges grew after 1717 and Freemasonry attracted many Fellows of the Royal Society. Several were closely involved in promoting new lodges and developing the constitutional basis of the new Grand Lodge. Early lodges were sometimes a forum for lectures on scientific subjects.

The early 18th Century was an exciting time. London was laced with a network of social and political clubs and societies, the most important and fashionable of which met to establish Freemasonry. Its reorganization in 1717 and subsequent modernization created a larger national matrix of patronization under the new Grand Lodge. A new Constitutions of Freemasons was published in 1723 and again in 1738 to modernize and standardize the rules and regulations of the fraternity. This was the culmination of a rejuvenation of the Craft and was brought to fruition by the vigor of the Reverend Dr. James Anderson, Grand Warden of the Grand Lodge of England, and the Reverend Dr. Jean Theophilus Desaguliers, the third Grand Master in 1719 and later three times Deputy Grand Master of Grand Lodge of England, and a Fellow of the Royal Society.

This has been a thumbnail sketch of the Age of Enlightenment and the role the early years of Freemasonry played. It was the *Age of Reason*, for it was during this period that great advances in science and philosophy began to overcome much of the superstition found in religion. And although people were reluctant to give up their traditional Christian beliefs, they began to come into open conflict with the church over matters of faith vs. reason.

A Freemason, in his most comprehensive sense, must learn to subdue his passions – fear, hate, greed, selfishness, prejudice, intolerance, anger, envy – and improve himself in the science of character building. In Freemasonry we find three principal systems of symbolism.⁶

First, the building of a spiritual Temple using symbolic tools. Just as surely as the operative workman can erect a temporal structure by the use of the tools and implements of architecture, so we can erect a

⁵ *Freemasonry and the Birth of Modern Science*, Dr. Robert Lomas, Gresham College, Fair Winds Press, April 2007

⁶ *The Spiritual Significance of Freemasonry*, Silas H. Shepherd, Masonic Enlightenment, edited by Michael R. Poll, pp 139-142. 2014

beautiful Temple of Character if we will use the tools of our speculative science as we are taught.

Secondly, the symbolism of the Lost Word has taught countless Masons the usefulness of searching for Truth – the endless search for truth and light that never ceases from cradle to the grave. God's Infinite Truth will bolster us as we prepare ourselves by soul development.

Lastly, Freemasonry teaches by an allegory of unsurpassed beauty the great lesson that our bodies are but the temporary shelter of our soul, and after passing through the experiences necessary the dust returns to its Mother Earth and the soul returns unto God who gave it.

Let me conclude with three rituals that offer keys to enlightenment:

The First Degree, the *Degree of Ethics*, is characterized by the principles of Moral Truth or relations governing men.

The Second Degree, the *Degree of Metaphysics Understood Rationally*, is characterized by the heavenly science or knowledge of the spiritual nature obscured in created things.

The Third Degree, the *Degree of Metaphysics Understood Intuitively*, is characterized by the relationship between man and God.

In the words of the Age of Enlightenment – *Fiat lux!* Let there be light!



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