



# Freemasonry and the Protestant Thought: The Abstract on Their Common History of Similarities and Differences

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BONN 2021

This relatively short abstract is going to discuss the position of Freemasonry in the Protestant countries, particularly Great Britain and further on the United States; how did both parties connect, what was their relationship and how did the latter tolerate Freemasonry? The Reformation gave birth and later raised many revolutionary ideas and supposedly Freemasonry is in one way or another was related to the process.

It has been known to nearly everyone that the origin of modern Freemasonry goes back to England. This country managed to provide the beginning of its most important traditions, the majority of the rituals were developed there and particularly the country procured enough safety, so early lodges could establish themselves without constantly looking over the shoulder. Religious tolerance was on the rise in England after the so-called “glorious revolution of 1688”, the country was moving toward more changes, and the period particularly coincided with the formation of Freemasonry.<sup>1</sup> King James II, a Catholic son of Charles I, was removed and newly established monarchs, William and Mary have acquired the throne, who both were Protestants. A Bill of Rights that followed, gave protection to previously rebellious Protestant groups, but not to Catholics or atheists: in Freemasonry atheists are excluded too.<sup>2</sup> Catholicism was still seen as a foreign influence in England. At that particular time it became very obvious that the majority of people became increasingly tired of the religious wars of the past [English Civil War, Catholics or Anglicans vs. Puritans], the need for toleration was in the air.<sup>3</sup> The prominent contemporary English philosopher and political thinker, John Locke was picturing his ideas based on tolerance and faith, excluding atheism or fanaticism of any kind. The belief was necessary, disbelief was not accepted, but people had a right to join any church, something quite new for that age.<sup>4</sup> This notion reminds the concepts, later established in the Freemason’s Constitution written by James Anderson, a *Presbyterian* [Scottish version of Calvinism] *pastor* and a lawyer. All early English Freemasons were Protestants, born in the officially Protestant country. Modern ideas of tolerance in England coincided with the establishment of Freemasonry in time and simultaneously became intertwined with the progressive and cutting-edge ideas such as Deism. Matthew Tindal and John Toland, Unitarian theologians [rejecting the Trinity concept], born as Protestants, and later well-known deists made a profound influence on Freemasonry.<sup>5</sup> Tindal focused upon the idea that there must be a religion upon which everyone will agree, some sort of concept that shall not divide people, but get them together.

I am so far from thinking the maxims of Confucius and Jesus Christ to differ; that I think the plain and simple maxims of the former will help to illustrate the more obscure ones of the latter.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Frahm, *The Cross and the Compass: Freemasonry and Religious Tolerance in Mexico*, (Palibrio, 2014) at p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p 11.

<sup>3</sup> S.G. Hefelbower, *The Relation of John Locke to English Deism*, (Chicago, 1918) at pp. 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> Frahm, *The Cross and the Compass*, at p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Knoop and G. P. Jones, *Freemasonry and the Idea of Natural Religion*, (London, Printed for private circulation, 1942) at pp. 42-43.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Tindal, *Christianity As Old as the Creation: Or, The Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature*, (Adegi Graphics LLC, 1999) at pp. 77, 341-342, 396-398.

This is the pivotal point in which the idea of Freemasonry was getting born, many new ideas were chatted among the educated classes, it was the end of the seventeenth century, soon after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, and probably the final victory of the Protestant monarchy in England. Such works of Matthew Tindal as *Letter to the Reverend the Clergy (1694)* and *Reflections on [...] the Doctrine of the Trinity (1695)*, a Protestant [liberal Anglican?], who became the outright deist and natural philosopher, turned to be important in the formation of the future tolerant and innovative thinking, an essential part of the Freemasonic tradition. Religion of the country was tolerated with the natural, deistic concept of the Grand Architect in the lodge, something that reflected Tindal's ideas on the natural religion.<sup>7</sup> Another important thinker of the era John Toland [Irish by birth] was also a follower of deism, and an author of *Pantheisticon* and *Christianity Not Mysterious (1696)*. Particularly after his studies in Edinburgh [mostly Presbyterian city by that time], he became possibly involved in some secret societies that could predate Freemasonry or student fraternities.<sup>8</sup> This interesting mix of the newly established *relative* tolerance in the officially Protestant country and progressive ideas of the day gave birth to the well-known English Enlightenment.

Previously mentioned James Anderson, an author of the first known Freemason's Constitution [1723] was a Presbyterian pastor, or minister of the Scots Church in Westminster to be more specific. He is also not so well known for his book called, *Royal Genealogies Or the Genealogical Tables of Emperors, Kings and Princes*, published by Bettenham in 1732. His Constitution is the blueprint of the speculative Freemasons until today, and his figure is seen as one of the most influential in Freemasonry that has shaped this organization.<sup>9</sup> He is probably one of the most, if not the most important examples of the connection between Protestant representation in the construction of Freemasonry and its later existence. The whole story did not end in England, the Freemasonry continued to grow faster in the Protestant countries than in any other country where Reformation did not take place. Founding Fathers of the United States such as George Washington and Benjamin Franklin were Freemasons and Protestants. George Washington was often suspected for his deistic position, which he could have kept secret.<sup>10</sup> In France where Protestants [*Huguenots*] were not well tolerated well until the French Revolution of 1789, so the best place for them to be truly *equal* to others, express their views or criticize the Roman Catholic Church was the Freemason's Lodge.<sup>11</sup> The expression used by Freemasons, "to be on the level" ardently applied to many Protestant Freemasons in France, where the religious tolerance was slowed down by the absolute monarchy and the Catholic Church [Gallican]. One of the infamous reformers in Freemasonry [seen as a rebel in the Regular Masonic organizations until today] Frederic Desmons was a

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<sup>7</sup> Douglas Knopp, *The Genesis of Freemasonry, An Account of the Rise and Development of Freemasonry in Its Operative, Accepted, and Early Speculative Phases*, (Q.C. Correspondence Circle, 1978) at p. 257.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans*, (Cornerstone Book, 2006) at pp. 153-154.

<sup>9</sup> James Anderson, *The Constitutions of the Free-masons: Containing the History, Charges, Regulations, &c. of that Most Ancient and Right Worshipful Fraternity. For the Use of the Lodges*, (William Hunter, 1723).

<sup>10</sup> Stephen J. Vicchio, *George Washington's Religion: The Faith of the First President*, (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2019) at p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> Handbook on Freemasonry, an article by Guy Liagre, *Protestantism and Freemasonry*, (BRILL, 2014) at p. 165.

Protestant minister, who promoted significant changes to the General Regulations [*Statute*] of the Grand Orient de France in 1877.<sup>12</sup>

So far the discussion touched merely similarities or parallels between Freemasonry and Protestantism, however, to keep the analytical pace it should be noted that they share many differences, among which the most important one is the factor of *religion* itself. Freemasonry has never claimed to be the religion, when on the other hand the Protestantism is one of the branches of Christianity consisting of many denominations. As Lynn Dumenil noted in his book, *Freemasonry and American Culture, 1880 - 1930*, that Freemasons could have identified their organization with Protestantism, but were not to exhort the religious system.<sup>13</sup> Some Protestant organizations or churches, indeed, were not welcoming Freemasonry as their partner. In the United States, which is often seen to be the bastion of Freemasonry and deeply rooted Protestant foundations, there was the Anti-Masonic Party that was solidified just by one goal - to limit or destroy Freemasonry in America. Freemasons were accused of a murder of William Morgan on September 12, 1826, most likely self-claiming former Freemason, but certainly a stonemason known for his scandalous behavior, and threats to expose the secrets of Freemasons.<sup>14</sup> There was no evidence, but the public picked the case up, and eventually, the whole agenda resulted in the creation of the Anti-Masonic Party. It was the only political party in American history, which was established for merely one goal and it happened to be directed against Freemasonry. It may not be thoroughly mentioned again that the United States and the state of New York, Batavia County where the affair took place, were mostly Protestant in the 1820s. During that time many Protestant Evangelicals in America began to experience the decline of their political power, for example, they could not stop the Sunday mail service; Freemasons were often accused in the esoteric, anti-Christian rituals, and generally, the fraternity was alleged in the “irreligious” behavior.<sup>15</sup> In the Protestant England, not everything was tolerant, Samuel Prichard’s anti-Masonic pamphlet *Masonry Dissected* was published in 1730, in the British North American Colonies, the New York Gazette attacked the fraternity in 1737, and later after the American revolution, the *Congregational* clergy was accusing Freemasons in anti-Christianity, Jeffersonian Republicanism, and threats to authority.<sup>16</sup>

The general conclusion may be that Freemasonry had factually originated in the Protestant world, did absorb its burst of inspiration, which has begun during the Reformation and caught all the lights of the age of English Enlightenment. However, the human nature of suspicion, intolerance, and an aggravating wish to blame someone else in their problems did take place in the Protestant countries, too. Human nature is not perfect and it must hold any scholar or student, who is interested in the relationship between the Freemasonry and Protestant Christian tradition from idealizing the position of Freemasonry in the Protestant world, even though it was far better than elsewhere. Freemasonry was always the organization that on one

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<sup>12</sup> Frank Tallett, Nicholas Atkin, *Religion, Society and Politics in France since 1789*, (A&C Black, 1991) at p. 128.

<sup>13</sup> Lynn Dumenil, *Freemasonry and American Culture, 1880-1930*, (Princeton University Press, 2014) at p. 125.

<sup>14</sup> William Preston Vaughn, *The Anti-Masonic Party in the United States: 1826-1843*, (University Press of Kentucky, 2014) at p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, at p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, at pp. 12-13.

hand took the best from the *Protestant thought* and ideas that have developed in the Protestant countries, but at the same time could experience its religious sharp edges.

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