

Henrik Bogdan and Jan A.M. Snoek, eds. *Handbook of Freemasonry*. Leiden: Brill, 2014. xx + 669 pp. ISBN: 978-90-04-21833-8.

The amount of publications dealing with Freemasonry is startling, usually approaching the phenomenon either thematically, or in a purely encyclopedic fashion. *Handbook of Freemasonry* proves to be something completely different – a handbook for consultation – with contributions from no less than twenty-seven scholars extensively and profoundly discussing and circling this more than three hundred year old tradition of initiatory societies. *Handbook of Freemasonry* consists of five slightly overlapping thematic parts: history, religion, sociology, politics, and culture. Each part is further sub-divided into thirty chapters, excluding the introduction, thus creating a wide range of entrances to explore and analyze the complexity of this initiatory society and its ambient contexts.

The first section (Chapters 2–8) deals with historical perspectives and provides the foundation for the following parts. Jan A.M. Snoek and Henrik Bogdan (chapter 2) set out the history of Freemasonry in a brief but lucid and comprehensive fashion, drawing the architectural blueprint, so to speak, for the forthcoming reading. This chapter covers a wide range of origin, content and development, areas that are to be expanded and further developed in the following chapters. The first part also treats the so-called *Old Charges* (chapter 3) – the supposed link between medieval stonemasons and Enlightenment Freemasonry – especially through the *Regius* (early 1400s) and *Cook* (early-mid 1400s) manuscripts. Andrew Prescott stresses the importance of comparative studies regarding such guild documents in Europe. This is a good point, since it would widen the perspective on the origin of Freemasonry from the discussion of Scottish or English origins, and shed light on why the initiatory society was born on British soil. Prescott's section foreshadows this polemical origin debate (Scotland vs. England), which expands in the following two chapters.

Chapters four and five unfold two different ideas of where to place the origin. David Stevenson argues for Scotland, mainly leaning on the William Schaw "*statutes*" (1598, 1599), while Matthew D.J. Scanlan places the origin in England. He stresses a methodological flaw: the tendency to misinterpret commonly used terms, such as "freemason", with the consequence that entire arguments are based on misconceptions of the true meanings and importance of the terms involved. Scanlan concludes his chapter by dismantling the term

in question, which is contextualized and reinterpreted in order to prove his thesis of Freemasonry's English origin. Both scholars present well-argued evidence for their respective positions; however, though the discussion of where to situate the first Freemasonic lodges is of historical interest, the question is always at risk of coming down to prestige. In my opinion, considering that building guilds similar to the British ones also existed on the Continent, the question of origin becomes far more interesting in a broader European perspective, calling for comparative studies between documents, contexts and milieus that bear resemblance to the English ones.

The remaining chapters explicate the Masonic adoption of templarism and chivalry, and by extension the development of "High Degrees", and also explore Freemasonry's role in the Enlightenment by using Benjamin Franklin as a case study. Part one concludes with a short chapter on Masonic historiography, tracing the history and development of the study of Freemasonry.

The second section (chapters 9–16) centers on a religious theme, dealing with the often complicated relationship between Freemasonry and specific religious traditions. The chapters cover Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Eastern religions, closing with the influence of Western esotericism and new religious movements. We are shown various accusations against Freemasonry, which in many cases were based on the secrecy with which Masons were considered to be cloaking themselves, not uncommonly giving rise to conspiracy theories. Such accusations are discussed alongside various notions of Freemasonry, in diverse phases and milieus, at times ascribed an antagonistic role and occasionally intermingled with the other religious traditions in question. The chapters in this second part of the volume work well together, seeming to collectively build up a dynamic, fluid narrative that lends fluency to the reading.

The religious theme culminates with Robert Jan van Pelt's intriguing contribution concerning liaisons between Freemasonry and Judaism (chapter 12). This complex and often wrongly understood relationship is outlined in a lucid fashion, with consideration of both traditional influences and conspiracy theories. In this section Pelt discusses religious, social, political, and apocalyptic aspects of the (real and imagined) connection between Judaism and Freemasonry. He initially deals with the complexity, and by extension difficulty, of interpreting influences and transfers between traditions: "If we find Old Testament themes in, for example Freemasonry, then we must follow the chain of influence in proper order, moving from the closest relation to the most remote." (189) By following these traces, van Pelt concludes that the content from the Old Testament that found its way into Freemasonry is derived from

the King James Bible rather than the Tanakh. Overall, the extensive chapter on Freemasonry and Judaism is one of the volume's pinnacles – on its own it will attract many readers to the *Handbook*. However, it might have been interesting to see a chapter in this section dedicated to conspiracy theories about Freemasonry alone, thereby opening up a discussion of phenomena such as the Illuminati.

Moving away from conventional religious traditions and their relation to Freemasonry, chapter 15 explicates the influence of Western esotericism on Freemasonry, exploring particular discourses and currents to explain the transfer of esoteric traits into Masonic structures. Treating concepts of initiation and esoteric knowledge, Bogdan emphasizes “the experience *and interpretation* of the ritual [as] the esoteric message,” (282) further connecting it to a transmutative effect upon the initiate in a way that is consistent with his underlying idea of *gnosis* as both intellectual and experiential knowledge.¹ The chapter continues to display how esoteric traits intermingle and become embedded mainly in the “High Degrees,” even though the influence varies considerably between different systems (Rites) and degrees, as well as particular times and locations, in order to define Freemasonry as typified by initiatory rather than secret organizations.

Part three (chapters 17–21) focuses on sociological traits, including the inner structures of Freemasonry (i.e. initiation, rites and systems) and compares them with other societies. Snoek's initial piece (chapter 17) on rituals of initiation as an instrumental part of Freemasonry is not only neat and expositive, but also illustrative of how the volume's chapters are interconnected, as his discussion contains links to chapters on historical and esoteric content. Within the thematic framework of sociology, Kristiane Hasselmann (chapter 18) provides us with a section on the boundary to psychology, examining the idea of the “nature of Masonic rituals as specific *practices of the self*?” (329) Her focus is on how English “gentlemen Freemasonry” adopts a new philosophy aimed at shaping a performative *habitus*, which in turn refines the lodge members morally and spiritually and modifies their patterns of behavior. Unfortunately, her text and interesting analysis are weighted down by a large amount of (often heavy) quotations, which is a pity since the theory and the arguments are of great value.

Arturo de Hoyos (chapter 19) guides us through the rise and development of different Masonic Rites and systems, in a chapter that treats administrative or governmental authority regarding initiation or instruction. Describing and explaining some of the separate forms of rite that came into existence, and

¹ Bogdan, Henrik, “New Perspectives on Western Esotericism,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 13, no. 3 (2010): 97–105; Bogdan, Henrik, “Introduction: Modern Western Magic,” *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 12, no. 1 (2012): 1–16.

covering various times and places, Hoyos creates a much-needed ‘Rite-map,’ sorting out the complexities of diverse Masonic systems.

Despite the well laid out elucidation of Masonic rites in this section, at least two further developments would have made it even stronger. The Swedish Rite is presented, although a more profound treatment would have been interesting considering the system’s unique stance in only accepting Christianity as a foundation, more or less excluding the concept of the “Great Architect” that is more inclusive of Judaic and Islamic interpretations. Also, given the complexity of Freemasonry’s inner structure and hierarchies, together with the Rites and Systems, a couple of diagrams would have created additional clarity.

The penultimate part imbricates with the preceding section and presents a socio-political theme dealing with Freemasonry’s relation to feminism, race, colonialism, and adjoining issues like nationalism and war. The section opens with the role of women in Freemasonry (chapter 22). We are told that in addition to the existence of Adoption Freemasonry (c. 1774), quite a large number of mixed orders were created from the mid-1700s onwards – partly as a result of the emergence of “quasi-masonic” orders – with the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (1887) as a prime example. In this chapter – “Freemasonry and Women” – Snoek portrays Adoption Freemasonry not as anti-feminist, but as a part of the progress of feminism. He emphasizes this Masonic movement as “a form of women’s emancipation *avant la lettre*,” (411) thus arguing that the female orders preceded rather than mirrored feminism. He provides us with an outline of the manner of female participation in Masonic orders, and describes how they obtained creative control over the handling and workings of Masonic rituals.

The issue of nationalism (chapter 25) and Freemasonry is treated by Jeffrey Tyssens. Basing his argument on discourse theory, he cautions against presuming that identities are fixed categories. The fraternity is examined as a historical agent used by both pro- and counter-nationalistic movements, “a kind of ideological palimpsest where different identity projects have been written one over the other.” (463) Thus, Freemasonry both promotes national cohesion and works as a bridge between nations by forming new identity patterns.

The concluding part (chapters 27–31) places Freemasonry within culture and art, starting with music and closing with material culture. Part five also considers subjects such as literature, primarily the literature *of* Freemasonry, modern art and architecture. Marijo Ariëns-Volker (chapter 29) connects the fraternity to modern art, emphasizing the fact that Freemasonry has always been attractive to artists. The chapter illuminates the interconnected traits between different schools of art and Masonry. We are guided through

Romanticism and Martinism and related persons and currents, in connection with a somewhat esoteric Masonic context, and the transfer of ideas between these various domains. It should be mentioned that despite starting off with Freemasonry, a great part of this chapter deals with occult currents closely related to various Masonic offshoots, such as Martinès de Pasqually's *Ordre des Chevaliers Maçons Elus Cohen*.

The penultimate chapter connects to the volume's first chapter. James Stevens Curl's research on Freemasonry and architecture outlines the tools of the stonemason and how they are connected both to architecture and the speculative aspects of the craft. The chapter concentrates on "the more subtle aspects that suggest a Masonic thread," (560) ignoring buildings where the Masonic aspect is no more than a representation of a symbol. It is a perspicuous presentation of Masonry's relation to architecture, including historical traits and various styles, as well as both indoor and outdoor designs with Masonic overtones. Curl returns to his initial exposition and wraps up the chapter with quite a harsh assault on modernity, especially concerning architecture.

The volume brings together eminent scholars on Freemasonry and the articles are generally commendable, both in terms of the historical data they bring to light and in terms of their analyses. The book's form is itself a piece of grand architecture – the initial chapters create solid ground which permits the latter chapters to unfold more chiseled details. The chapters mutually enhance each other, as do the thematic parts, and are conjoined in a logical fashion; the consonance in content and composition reveals a firm and proficient editorial hand. It is hard to criticize the *Handbook of Freemasonry* on account of its content without nitpicking – the omissions discussed previously are the only drawbacks of this tidy, well-balanced volume.

These minor objections notwithstanding, the volume is strongly recommended to both scholars specialized in the field of Freemasonry and those focusing either on cultural studies or the history of religions in general. To sum up, the volume contributes significantly to the understanding of Freemasonry with its diverse entries and points of focus. The *Handbook of Freemasonry* likely qualifies as the most significant work to have been published on Freemasonry in recent years, and will be a source of great importance for years to come, both in terms of its theoretical developments and as a reliable source for consultation.

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