

# Freemasonry and the occult

## Tell us about yourself.

I'm Trevor W. McKeown, "an obscure Freemason of no authority." As a college student I was fascinated by conspiracy theories, the idea that there has been an organized attempt to control world affairs secretly and for centuries. Many of these theories included Freemasonry. I joined Freemasonry over twenty-five years ago and have continued to study conspiracy theories as I also studied Freemasonry. It didn't take me long to realize that any theory involving Freemasonry also involved considerable logical fallacy, errors in fact and outright lies.

I'm curator for the Vancouver Masonic Library and Archives. I'm also Grand Historian for the jurisdiction, editor of their *Masonic Bulletin*, a Past Master of the Vancouver Lodge of Education and Research, and the Grand Lodge website administrator, but most importantly, I am "an obscure Freemason of no authority," for all Freemasons meet on the level, as equals.

## Do you believe that Washington, DC was laid out according to certain principles of masonic philosophy?

I'm not sure that there are any principles of masonic philosophy that *can be* incorporated in a street plan. One can incorporate symbols. But symbols mean what the user wants them to mean. So, for any pattern or design in the street plans to be specifically masonic, I'd say no.

We have to talk about definition of terms. What is masonic philosophy? Promotion of the study of the liberal arts and sciences, including logic. Promotion of the ideals of faith, hope and charity. Promotion of the ideals of fraternity, equality and liberty. Promotion of an active, informed involvement in the affairs of the community. The practice of brotherly love, relief and truth. Hollow words if we don't put them into practice, but they are the philosophy of Freemasonry.

As a historian it's important to distinguish between what I believe and what I can prove. I don't see any proof.

We also have to make a distinction between the street plan of Washington and the architecture that adorns it. While the street plan is not masonic, there are dozens of examples of symbols, carvings, fiddley-bits, that are symbols known by Freemasons. But that doesn't make them masonic symbols. Architects are artists and they know their history. Many so-called masonic symbols: the beehive, faith, hope and charity personified as three women, one holding an open book, another, babies and the third, an anchor; the all-seeing eye; the pentagram—these were all Christian symbols before they were used by Freemasons. And before they were Christianized, they were used by other cultures, as far back as the Sumerians. Architects sometimes get to record their personality and life in the fiddley-bits. Faces of their children on images of coins, their own faces on gargoyles. The beehive is a symbol of industry to Freemasons. It has the same meaning to a whole lot of other people.

## George Washington is said to have played a major role in designing the city.

George Washington commissioned Pierre Charles L'Enfant —through Jefferson—but the record is clear that L'Enfant's three plans submitted to George Washington were his own, uninfluenced.

The actual survey, on the ground, was the work of Andrew Ellicott and Benjamin Bannaker.

The commissioners made several alterations before Washington approved the final plan. None of them were Freemasons. Or certainly, no record of.

So, I question if Washington had anything other than a cursory supervisory role in designing the city.

What sort of Freemason was Washington? He was a busy man and there are few records of his attending lodge. His correspondence suggests that he was knowledgeable in the philosophy and practice of Freemasonry. No one today has the authority to suggest what Washington might have thought about plans to incorporate masonic symbols into the street plan or architecture of the city. I hazard that Washington was a practical rationalist who might have gotten a chuckle out of hearing about it

### **The French architect, Pierre L'Enfant?**

Although there is a record suggesting that Pierre L'Enfant received the Entered Apprentice degree, there is no record of his completing his degrees, or being an active Freemason.

### **What about Thomas Jefferson?**

Thomas Jefferson was not a Freemason. American Freemasons, proud of their historical role in their nation's founding, were quick to add everyone they could to their rolls. Jefferson wrote an article on his ideas of the history of Freemasonry. But he wasn't one. The confusion is partially caused, or perpetuated, on the internet where hundred-year old books and articles can be turned into anonymous undated textfiles. It's only been in the last fifty years, if not decade, that the list of famous Freemasons has become at all realistic.

### **Other confirmed Freemasons?**

I don't know of other confirmed Freemasons involved in the design of Washington DC. Some of the major architects were John Lenthall, Franklin Webster Smith, and Adulf Cluss. They were not Freemasons.

### **Is it possible that some of the "gaps" in documented information concerning early masons has do to with the organizations' practice of secrecy? If not, why not?**

What do you mean by "early masons" ? After the American Revolution there was no reason to be secretive. In fact they were so full of themselves and "out there" that perhaps this was part cause of a reaction that lead to the brief popularity of the Anti-masonic Party of the 1830s. If by "early" you mean pre-1717, there was a definite secrecy back then. And a need. By their very existence, working without permission of king or pope, the lodges promoted innate personal freedoms: freedom of association, the right to privacy. The Freemasons said, "we get to choose or own leader by vote of all members—neither church nor state can tell us how to govern ourselves." At the time this was a real threat to the established order of society; it was revolutionary, radical and subversive—and is the foundation of western society today. And considering who is attacking Freemasonry today, perhaps many still view it as a real threat.

### **Is the obelisk a masonic symbol?**

Obelisks—in some form—have appeared in architecture since before recorded history. During the period of major construction in Washington there was quite a craze for all things Egyptian. Freemasons are not immune to fads and there was an attempt by a small number of Freemasons to graft some Egyptian philosophy or at least symbolism and architecture onto Freemasonry. But no, the obelisk is not particularly masonic.

## **Are there Masonic symbols embedded anywhere in the city of Washington?**

There are several masonic buildings in Washington such as the House of the Temple or Scottish Rite Headquarters. The Women's Museum of Art still retains the masonic symbols of its earlier owners, the Grand Lodge of DC. The George Washington Masonic National Memorial has a lodge room. The United States Capitol Building has squares and compasses in some paintings.

After that, you start finding symbols with a tenuous relationship to Freemasonry: sheaves of corn, beehives, goddess figures or female depictions of spiritual attributes: faith, hope, charity. And one highly imaginative idea that there is a goddess figure representing Virgo somewhere in Freemasonry. Now, Freemasonry picks up symbols as it goes along. An American Freemason around 1780 came up with an image of a weeping virgin and Father Time complete with forelock and scythe, standing beside a broken column with an hourglass at its base. A pretty picture used to illustrate a lecture written as an explanation of the ritual. But it certainly didn't represent any older goddess tradition in Freemasonry.

## **Is there really a pentagram formed in the streets of Washington?**

There are several opinions floating around about Washington's street plan. Pentagons, pentagrams, owls, pillars, letters and words, streets that align with star charts. Opinions that don't qualify as theories. So, there is a pentagram, almost. One street doesn't actually follow through. Jefferson's background was as a large landowner so he suggested a simple grid street plan. L'Enfant had studied Wren's plans for London, and the details of the rebuilt cities of Europe which attempted various radial designs. Put a radial design over a grid and if you have five main roads out of town, you get a pentagram. Big surprise!

### **The pentagram**

The pentagram is a fascinating symbol. And no one can claim with any authority to make it mean any one thing. In Sumeria it was the symbol for a city and also for a quadrant or region of the sky.

The pentagram has evolved, from a pre-Christian symbol for a Mesopotamian city or later symbol for health or the heavens, to an early Christian symbol for Christ Transfigured, or truth, and then to a mediaeval talisman to guard against evil. Its re-emergence as a humanist or hermetic symbol of man's relationship to the cosmos and its later reversal from a symbol guarding against evil to a symbol representing evil has been ascribed to many causes. Midwives and herbalists note that their practice of medicine has often been proscribed as witchcraft; their use of a symbol of health was as misunderstood as their own practices were reviled by paternalistic and oppressive theocracies. Students of religious intolerance have noted that a symbol that can be ascribed to the Jews, Arabs or pagans will inevitably acquire negative connotations in the xenophobic climate of mediaeval Europe. These theories lose weight when the pentagram's use by the medical profession of the 16th century is noted. The root causes are difficult, if not impossible, to document. The only real fact to be gleaned from this history is that the pentagram had, and has, many meanings.

## **Is there a difference between a pentagram, pentacle, pentangle, and a pentalfa?**

To a mathematician the pentagram is simply a five-pointed figure. Others will define the pentagram as a pentagon with its sides extended to five points. Its outline can be drawn as a woven figure called the endless knot and represents the concept of infinity. Wiccans will make even further distinction and define the pentacle as the pentagram inside a pentagon or circle. Historically, the pentacle referred to any amulet, often incorporating an hexagram. The words

pentagram and pentacle (or pantacle) are not necessarily connected with the number five. Pentacle probably comes from an old French word for “to hang” —pendant—and means a talisman or, by extension, any symbol used in magical operations. There is little agreement on these distinctions.

### **Where, according to your research, did the idea of the pentagram as an “evil” symbol begin?**

It is certainly not original research on my part. It’s all available in your public library.

Go back to the Pythagoreans, a school of Greek philosophers and they viewed it as a powerful good luck symbol. And an emblem of perfection or the symbol of the human being. In mediaeval times it was a warding sign to protect the user from evil. The farmer would paint it on the side of his barn to ward off the evil eye, or misfortune and calamity. A mother would draw it on her baby’s cradle to ward off illness. Later, so-called magicians would try to summon demons or imps out of an early form of scientific curiosity. They drew pentagrams to protect themselves and contain any demon that might wander by. People discovering these symbols assumed they represented the demons.

A French writer on the occult named Éliphas Lévi claimed in his *Dogma and Ritual of High Magic* in 1856, with no justification or historical precedent, that the pentagram with one point upward represents the good principle and one downward, the evil. Many subsequent authors have repeated this arbitrary distinction. No one can give any authority for the claim. Nowhere can any such distinction be found in print prior to this.

### **What is the association with Venus?**

If you mark the position of Venus relative to the setting sun every 584 days and then do this five times you get five points roughly in the shape of a pentagon or pentagram. But historically Venus is equated with the Sumerian goddess, Ishtar (Ishhara, Irnini, Inanna) whose symbol is an eight or sixteen point star. Why did Venus become equated with the pentagram? Bad research.

Christianity historically either absorbed the symbols of earlier religions, or subverted them. To the Romans, Venus was the bright morning star representing the light-bringer Lucifer. The attributes of the Roman Lucifer had nothing to do with the Hebrew Satan, but early Christian writers combined the two and to this day, for many, Lucifer is another name for Satan.

So if Venus is equated with Satan and, by the mid-eighteenth century, the pentagram is associated with evil, then it is no great leap to accept the pentagram as being a symbol for Venus.

One of the symbols the early Christians absorbed from gnostic and pythagorean beliefs was the pentagram. Only this one they didn’t try to reverse into an evil symbol. That didn’t happen for another eighteen hundred years. No, this one they used as is. Early Christians attributed the pentagram to the Five Stigmata of Christ or the doctrine of the Trinity plus that of the two natures of Christ. From then until mediaeval times, it was a lesser-used Christian symbol. Its form implied truth, religious mysticism and the work of Creator.

### **Why is Villard de Honnecourt’s sketchbook significant?**

Villard de Honnecourt worked for the Cistercian Order as an architect between 1225 and 1250 CE. He travelled widely and his sketchbook is one of the few examples we have of architect’s sketches of the period. They may signify a knowledge of the golden ratio.

### **Does the pentagram have any specific designation in Freemasonry?**

Maybe. It doesn’t get mentioned in masonic ritual or any of the lectures of instruction. But

it often occurs in illustration and regalia. The pentagram was important to the Pythagoreans. And Pythagoras is important to Freemasons. Euclid's 47th proposition, also called the Pythagorean Theorem — the sum of the squares of two sides of a right angle equal the square of its hypotenuse — is important in architecture. But Freemasons, and non-masons, tend to gild the lily, to embroider.

Now, the Golden Section, or Golden Ratio, is a formula that divides a line at a point such that the smaller part relates to the greater as the greater relates to the whole: the ratio of the lengths of the two sides is equal to the ratio of the longer side to the sum of the two sides.

This formula creates a pattern often observed in nature, ranging from fish scales to spiral galaxies.

Although Pythagoras was familiar with the golden ratio, it is questionable if it was much used by early architects. But this was believed by Freemasons in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And this gave early illustrators and regalia manufacturers reason enough to include the symbol.

### **What is the purpose of ritual for the Freemason?**

The ritual is allegory, metaphor. The lessons of Freemasonry: truth, honour, fidelity, charity, are taught through ritual. It's a teaching tool. We tend to think of ritual as either being religious or magical. But ritual is important to humans in many forms. Shaking hands is a ritual but it doesn't imply a religious intent.

### **Can you explain the symbolism of "corn, wine, and oil" and how the ceremony works?**

Corn, wine and oil are referred to often in the Bible. Corn is grain, and grain is a symbol for plenty. Wine is a symbol of hospitality. Oil had a deep religious significance to ancient peoples. It represented wealth as the fruit of labour and the benevolence of God. The corn is poured as an emblem of nourishment; the wine as an emblem of refreshment and oil as an emblem of joy and happiness. Corn, wine and oil were the wages paid our ancient brethren. They were the "master's wages" of the days of King Solomon

The cornerstone laying ceremony varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction but basilic involves little more than the pouring of each on the cornerstone accompanied by a few words on their significance. The idea of a cornerstone laying predates Freemasonry by thousands of years and originally seems to have required the actual death of either a person or animal buried under the stone. This would be considered a sacrifice to appease the local gods or spirits. But that doesn't mean it has any similar meaning for Freemasons.

### **Who was Albert Pike and why is he important to Freemasonry?**

Many Freemasons might ask the same question. Pike had no impact on regular Craft Freemasonry. But he took a collection of additional initiatory degrees popular at the time in another organization called the Scottish Rite, rewrote them, and spent the rest of his life promoting them. He was so successful that a great number of North American Freemasons also joined the Scottish Rite.

### **What's the truth behind allegation regarding Pike and lucifer worship?**

It's a fraud, a hoax and a lie. A hoaxer with the pen name of Léo Taxil decided to pull a practical joke on the Catholic church in 1885 and created a fantasy exposé about devil worshipping masonic lodges in America. He faked a letter from Pike saying that Lucifer was the god of Freemasonry. Taxil called a press conference in Paris in 1887, announced that he had made it all

up, and retired to the country. Newspaper reports are easily available. The Catholic Church denounced him and all his writings. But the lie keeps being spread.

**Pike is said to have been influenced by the works of Eliphas Lévi. Was Lévi a Mason?**

I don't know if Pike was influenced by Lévi. Pike was a jackdaw, picking over the writings of everyone who crossed his path. He reprinted part of Lévi's writings in his *Morals and Dogma* but that's about all.

Éliphas Lévi was initiated into a lodge in Paris in 1861. He then gave a lecture telling the Freemasons what their rituals and symbols really meant. When he found that they didn't accept his ideas, he quit, also in 1861.

This raises the question of what defines a Freemason. Someone who has been initiated? Someone who attends lodge regularly? Someone who puts the lessons of Freemasonry—charity, social responsibility— into practice in his daily life?

**Can you explain the difference between the traditional concepts of Lucifer vs. the idea of Satan?**

Christianity historically either absorbed the symbols of earlier religions, or inverted them. To the Romans, Venus was the bright morning star representing the light-bringer Lucifer. The attributes of the Roman Lucifer had nothing to do with the Hebrew Satan, but early Christian writers combined the two and to this day, for many, Lucifer is another name for Satan.

The word "Satan" is from a Hebrew word, "Saithan", meaning adversary or enemy. The Old Testament interpretation of Satan was mankind's adversary, not God's.

In literature and poetry, Lucifer, as a reference to a light-bringer, is often used as a metaphor for knowledge, wisdom, or learning.

It's important to stress that neither Lucifer nor Satan are ever referred to in masonic ritual.

**The Scottish Rite Journal used to be called *The New Age Magazine*. What is the difference between the Masonic idea of a "new age" and the "Shirley McLaine style" of new age philosophy?**

The Scottish Rite journal, *New Age Magazine*, started in 1904, was named more as a nod to the new century than anything else. It certainly had nothing to do with the new age movement. The new age as a reference to the dawning of the age of aquarius doesn't appear until 1944 with Alice Bailey and Walter Russell. Today "new age" is used to refer to just about anything outside the mainstream

Freemasonry doesn't use the term new age and it has no masonic significance.

**Is Freemasonry associated with Aleister Crowley, the O.T.O., the Golden Dawn, Madame H.P. Blavatsky and the founders of the Theosophical Society?**

Freemasonry isn't. There are Freemason who have been members of many groups but that doesn't imply that they are masonic groups. We are all on a spiritual journey through life. It is a personal, private journey that can also be shared in fellowship with others.

Crowley appears to have been less on a spiritual journey than on a quest for personal power and expression of ego. At one stage he was initiated into several clandestine masonic bodies in France. He was never accepted by regular Freemasonry. Although he wrote about Freemasonry, Freemasons didn't pay attention.

Helena Blavatsky is very definitely on record, in *Isis Unveiled*, categorically denying that she was ever initiated into regular Freemasonry, and she never had anything good to say about Freemasonry.

Social reformer Annie Besant introduced International Co-Freemasonry into England. Co-masonry initiates both men and women, and is not recognized by regular Freemasonry.

Bishop Leadbeater was also a Co-mason. So, at least two of the founders of the Theosophical Society were interested in Freemasonry, but regular Freemasonry was not interested in them.

**Some have said that Masonry's real purpose is to destroy Christianity for the purpose of establishing a one world religion. How do you respond to such a suggestion?**

With logic. Most religious anti-masonry is built on the foundation that Freemasonry is a religion. But it just ain't so. We've spent three hundred years stating that we are not a religion. Can you name a single religion that does that? It takes a particularly warped interpretation of Freemasonry to find any aspects of a religion. It is certainly not the interpretation of any Freemason.

Freemasonry promotes a belief in God. That is faith. It does not promote beliefs about God. That is religion. It has no eschatology, cosmology or any attribute of a religion.

It also does not promote the idea that all religions are equal. It promotes the idea that the practitioners of all religions are equal, and equally entitled to our regard and respect, and equally entitled to follow their chosen faith. Freemasonry does not promote any one religion.

**What is Freemasonry's real view of Christianity? How does Freemasonry view other religions?**

What is your city council's view? Or the local PTA? or any secular organization? The answer is that it is none of their business, it is not in their mandate, and they don't have an opinion or view on the subject of any religion. Freemasonry, as a body, does not believe itself qualified to have an opinion on religion. Period.

**Some masonic writers, such as Manly P. Hall, mention the 47th Proposition of Euclid, or the Pythagorean Theorem, as a symbol for a kind of esoteric trinity. How important is this symbol in Freemasonry?**

It *can* be interpreted as a symbol for the triune nature of God but this is not a masonic interpretation. It is certainly not restricted to masonic writers.

Freemasonry's use of the symbol is restricted to its association with Pythagoras, traditionally an early stonemason or at least a patron of stonemasons—and the importance in a formula so necessary in early construction of buildings.

**In Freemasonry, is there a concept of a Christ or messiah or savior figure? If so, how is he defined?**

Not being a religion, Freemasonry has no concept of a saviour or redeemer. Anti-masons say we do because they misunderstand part of our initiation ritual.

At one point in the legendary story—the metaphor—Hiram Abif, a fictional participant in the building of King Solomon's Temple, is killed. His murderers hastily bury the body. Other craftsmen find the body, take it out of the ground and then rebury it with proper reverence and ceremony in a proper place.

Anti-masons ignore the reburial and insist that this is a resurrection story and Hiram is somehow our god.

**Any final words on anti-masonry?**

It comes down to logic, language and common sense. Anti-masons will use the terms “the Freemasons” and “Freemasonry” interchangeably. But an individual Freemason can, and will, hold opinions not held by Freemasonry as a body. Don’t confuse the two. Just because someone was once a Freemason does not mean that Freemasonry necessarily made an impact on his life, or that his writings are at all representative of Freemasonry. Anti-masons and conspiracy theorists will use broad generalizations to hide the lack of any real connection between their so-called facts. And they will select facts that support their theories while ignoring contradicting facts. Quoting a whole bunch of century-dead writers who happened to hold opinions on Freemasonry, doesn’t mean Freemasonry as a body, or other individual Freemasons, held the same opinions. Don’t assume that labels define groups.

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This working script, submitted 29 July 2006, was intended to be the framework for an interview with Trevor W. McKeown by Christian J. Pinto for his documentary, *Riddles in Stone*. It was not used.