

Book Review: “Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation” by Henrik Bogdan, SUNY press, 2007

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Freemasonry is one of the most numerous and most spread out fraternal organizations, with a history of over three centuries. Unlike other fraternities, freemasonry, despite not being a religion, has a religious character, asking its members a belief in a Supreme Being. The latter is often invoked during the masonic ritual, under various names, such as “The Great Architect of the Universe”, and its scripture is represented in Lodge by the “Volume of the Sacred Law” – a book or a collection of books that reflect the beliefs of the member of that lodge, e.g. the Bible, the Pentateuch, the Quran or the Bhagavad Gita. Additionally, freemasonry extensively uses the symbol as a means of transmission and of acquisition of knowledge. These traits suggest a link between freemasonry and the current called by the historians of religion “Western esotericism”¹, a link that has not been rigorously analyzed by historians. The book “Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation” by Henrik Bogdan, published by SUNY press, in 2007, is a contribution towards an academic study of the relation between Western esotericism and masonic rituals of initiation.²

The majority of historians of religion include freemasonry in Western esotericism, e.g. Antoine Faivre, Pierre A. Riffard, though many researchers identified methodological issues in analyzing the relationship between the two: Bogdan points at Frances Yates, who faced the problem of comparing and evaluating sources on freemasonry and rosicrucianism. The difficulties stemmed from the fact that many authors, either freemasons or not, have written on the subject lacking any academic rigour, due to it not existing at the time, or due to their ignorance thereof. Nevertheless, there exist modern sources that are well worth studying, since they evince erudition and minimal bias, e.g. Robert A. Gilbert, Trevor Stewart.³ In his book, Bogdan doesn’t take into account such sources, although, for instance, he mentions the opinions of Arthur E. Waite. The presentation of the subject mostly follows the analysis by prominent historians of religion such as Frances Yates, Antoine Faivre, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, and focuses on the textual analysis of the catechisms.

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About the reviewer. I’ve been a freemason for ca. 5 years, and about 3 years before my initiation I became moderately interested in Western esotericism. I consider my qualifications to be representative for the mediocre freemason that shows a minimum of interest in esotericism. Therefore, this review is meant to be as less “esoteric” as possible, yet without compromising the authenticity of the content.

¹We will define this concept when discussing chapter I of the book.

²We will define this concept when discussing the scope of the book.

³We give two online articles as examples: Trevor Stewart, A Basic Historico-Chronological Model of the Western Hermetic Tradition, [link](#) and R. A. Gilbert, Freemasonry and the Hermetic Tradition, [link](#).

Study of Western Esotericism. He is a co-editor, with James R. Lewis, of the International Society for the Study of New Religions Book Series, Equinox Publishing and a member of the editorial board of the International Journal for the study of New Religions.⁴

The author states his intentions in a clear manner: he introduces the term “Masonic rituals of initiation” and wishes to present their development in a historical framework. These rituals are not only the rituals used in Freemasonry, but also rituals inspired by the latter. We define them more precisely in the observations regarding chapter II, for the moment we mention that the rituals outside Freemasonry analyzed by Bogdan are the first degree of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the three degrees of the Gardnerian Wicca. The second goal of the author is to analyze the relation between Masonic rituals of initiation and Western esotericism, by answering two questions: how is Western esotericism transmitted through masonic rituals of initiation, and what types of esotericism are transmitted. Furthermore, Bogdan states that his study doesn’t attempt to define the impact of the rituals on the candidate.

The book is structured in eight chapters, the final one being reserved for conclusions: the first three are an ample introduction into the topic, and the next four analyze the Craft, the side (or “high”) degrees, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and Wicca. The chapters are, to some degree, decoupled: the first three can be read as separate articles, and the next four are mainly linked by the instantiation of the general characteristics of the Masonic rituals of initiation in concrete examples.

The introductory chapters aim to define Western esotericism (chapter I), rituals of initiation (chapter II) and give a brief account of the history of Western esotericism from the 15th to the 17th century (chapter III). In my opinion, the material could have been reordered as III, I, II, assuming a natural flow between chapters I and II. The reasons for this reordering would be the adherence to a chronological presentation, as well as the fact that chapters I and III are obviously related, whereas chapter II is linked to chapters IV-VII, since it declares the fundamental characteristics of Masonic rituals of initiation.

In the first chapter, Western esotericism is described as a cultural phenomenon that arose from the mixture of Greek rationality and Christian faith. This characterization would not be very useful – it could be applied, for instance, to Neoplatonism as well, if it would not capture a fundamental trait of esotericism: the idea of counter-culture. During the Renaissance, European thought became increasingly divided between the scientific (or natural) and the theological (or moral) approach, and the polarization of the two seemed to exhaust all others modes of knowledge. However, we witness the birth of a third category, esotericism, flirting with science and religious dogma, yet using novel building blocks such as symbols, correspondences etc. The author proceeds to describe the development of Western esotericism as an academic field, starting with Frances Yates, continuing with Antoine Faivre, and ending with Wouter J. Hanegraaff. The average reader will no doubt be satisfied by these three perspectives (“pre-classical”, “classical” and “post-classical”), yet the definition of academic esotericism could be enriched by ideas from Pierre A. Riffard, Arthur Versuis and others.

The second chapter present a characterization of rituals of initiation. The key point is that initiation is meant to represent a progression from one stage of development, both biological and spiritual, to the next. The passage is realized by exiting the current condition, into an intermediary state that makes initiation possible, and finally entering the new condition. Regarding masonic initiation, the author mentions that the masonic secret is not an information that could be communicated and that the mason chooses not to reveal, but rather “masonic wisdom” is ineffable: it is experienced and interpreted by each of its members. Most importantly, Bogdan proposes a general schema of masonic rituals of initiation that will be instantiated in chapters IV-VII. This characterization is procedural:

⁴We used data from this [link](#).

1. The opening of the lodge.
2. Admission into the lodge – the candidate answers a number of questions.
3. Circumambulations.
4. The obligation never to divulge the secrets of the degree.
5. Formal admission into the degree.
6. Instruction into the secrets of the degree.
7. The giving of several visible tokens, e.g. gloves or a new apron, sometimes a new name or motto.
8. The closing of the lodge.

We can interpret these steps in relation to the definition of the ritual of initiation: 1 and 8 create and destroy the intermediary state, 2,3. and 4 suggest that initiation entails effort and preparation, as well as authentic desire to change, 5 is the focal point of the ceremony, 6 presents the consequences of the change – the acquisition of new rights and responsibilities, and 7 symbolizes the acceptance of the new condition.

The third chapter describes the history of Western esotericism during Renaissance, and begins with the import and translation of platonic, hermetic and kabbalistic texts in Europe in the second half of the 15th century. The presentation ends with the 17th century. In less than 10 pages, the author synthesizes magical thought in Renaissance, mentioning, among others, Johannes Trithemius, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, Giordano Bruno and John Dee, ending with a description of the Rosicrucianism. The latter generated a trend of secret societies, the majority of which developed systems of initiation. Paradoxically, in the fourth chapter, dedicated to Freemasonry in its infancy, the author is unable to find evidence of any Rosicrucian thought in the masonic ritual – only enumerations in pamphlets and other texts, in which freemasons are mentioned alongside rosicrucians and alchemists. However, the author identifies kabbalistic motifs, such as the loss of the Master's word that is likened to the loss of the pronunciation of the divine name, and the speculation that the third degree would represent a "unio mystica" by identification of the candidate with Hiram Abiff, and the latter with divinity. Unfortunately both motifs assume premises that aren't explicit in the masonic ritual or tradition. My opinion is that freemasonry represents a distinctive current that permanently changed and was enriched, and that it is today difficult to examine old texts without the unwritten context of the epoch. If we adopt Gershom Scholem's idea that mysticism can only develop within a religious tradition, then the "unio mystica" hypothesis is immediately rejected, since freemasonry is not a religion. I believe the degree of Master Mason is an invitation to mysticism by contemplation of mortality, of the distance between Creature and Creator, but under no circumstance the mystic act itself. An extreme opinion would completely eliminate the mystic aspect, yet I believe it can be refuted by simply citing a stanza of the closing ode:

Now the evening shadows closing,
Worn from toil to peaceful rest,
Mystic arts and rites reposing,
Sacred in each faithful breast.

Closing Ode

In the fifth chapter, the author presents a detailed account of the development of the auxiliary rites, or as the author calls them, the “high” degrees. The textual analysis focuses on the fourth degree of the “Rite Ecossais Philosophique”, that of the “Vrai Maçon”. The choice is motivated by the density of alchemical symbolism of the degree. Noting that some of the auxiliary rites exist even today, the reader would also be interested in the esoteric influences therein: Bogdan mentions that in the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite, the 18th degree, that of Knight of the Rose Croix, has rosicrucian influences, and the 28th, that of Knight of the Sun, has alchemical influences.

The next chapter is dedicated to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and the textual analysis presents the first of the ten degrees, that of Neophyte. Whereas the Craft rituals have no explicit esoteric component, the Golden Dawn rituals invoke kabbalistic, alchemical and egyptian elements etc. Although the structure and officers of the Neophyte degree present a striking similarity to the Craft rituals, one must be aware of the distinction that freemasonry encourages, besides the individual spiritual accomplishment, a series of social virtues. These are seemingly implicit at best or absent at worst from the Neophyte ritual, while the foreground is dominated by the search of “Occult Light”.

The eighth chapter briefly presents the history of the New Age religion Wicca and the rituals of the three degrees of the Gardnerian Wicca. Unfortunately, the precise characteristics of Wicca, as well as its esoteric content, are omitted. From a syncretic perspective, the esoterist might wonder: if the existing religions are shards of a unique Light, then what is the purpose of creating more shards, when we can gain intuitive insight of the Light? The apparent motivation behind Wicca is the return to a pre-Christian religion, but the historical inspirations of Gardner proved to be fake. The aim of the rituals seems similar to the Golden Dawn, the “Occult Light” is replaced by a magical “Art”, that, according to the second degree, is based on “Love”. We speculate that most likely this “Love” has its roots in Crowley’s ideas.

Given the currently most plausible hypothesis that freemasonry was born out of operative masonry, and masonic rituals, as well as Golden Dawn rituals, are of a symbolic nature, Wicca returns to the physical experience, probably motivated by the desire of an authentic emulation of a hypothetical primitive religion. The trials include the kiss of various parts of the body, auto-flagellation, and, possibly, sexual intercourse. The obvious question that arises is whether these “primitive” trials have any effect for modern man. The history of Western esotericism is a road of assimilation and elaboration of ancient traditions, and its rituals of initiation were entirely symbolic, meant to awaken an emotional-spiritual experience, mainly through oral communication. The involution proposed by Wicca suggest an absurd question of whether it would be “even more authentic” to return to cannibalistic Bacchic rituals or to Inca rituals of human sacrifice.

Therefore, the rituals analysed in the book, while sharing external similarities, belong to organizations that are widely different in nature and purpose: freemasonry is a fraternal organization, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn is an occult organization, and Wicca is a New Age religion. The only justification, and a very weak one in my opinion, of a relation between the three is that the founding members of Golden Dawn and Wicca were, at some point, masons. Regarding Wicca, we must mention that Gerald Gardner was not a mason for a long period. I believe that the choice of the examples in a common context needs a more rigorous motivation. Without it, one has difficulties imagining the criteria used by the author to select the examples out of the context of the epoch.

The style of writing is academic, evincing clarity, precision and an explicit delineation of the author’s opinion from the “didactic” presentation. Nevertheless, the qualifications of the targeted reader are hard to evaluate. On one hand, the author is meticulous about introducing the subject, by dedicating three chapters to this purpose, on the other hand

in the next chapters the concepts of freemasonry, Golden Dawn and Wicca are considered implicitly defined, and only brief historical notes are presented. The reader that, for example, doesn't know what Wicca is, or what are the officers in a masonic lodge, and what is their function, will not be enlightened by this book. We believe that this lack of perspective, especially in a study dedicated to the textual analysis of rituals, can only entertain an uncomfortable equivocation, in an unfortunate contrast with the academic approach of the subject. In other words, even in a specialized context, or perhaps more so in a specialized context, some definitions must be given instead of being assumed.

Generally, I believe the author has succeeded, given his assumptions, in showing possible relations between Western esotericism and what he denotes by "masonic rituals of initiation". Furthermore, I appreciate the identification of the defining traits of masonic rituals, as well as the acknowledgement of their import in other systems. The only problem related to methodology is that masonic rituals as well as esotericism, is entirely concerned with meaning, and the form is simply a formal vessel thereof. Therefore, we find out a bit about what masonic, Golden Dawn and Wicca rituals are, yet we remain puzzled, without any background knowledge, w.r.t. the reason of their existence, as well as their impact. In this review we broke the author's self-imposed rule of not discussing semantics, although sometimes he seems to take it liberally, e.g. in chapter four on the meaning of the third degree of the Craft. One of the goals of this review was to show that if one looks at the meaning of the rituals, then the "masonic rituals of initiation", although representing a convenient theoretical concept, can be, in reality, quite heterogeneous. A hyperbola of the situation is that of analysing, under the common theme of bringing hands together, the applause in a performed play, the struggle of a cleaning lady to eliminate a fly, and the prayer posture of a Catholic priest.