

THE PHILOSOPHY OF MASONRY – PART III

Five Lectures Delivered under the Auspices of the Grand Master of Massachusetts Masonic Temple, Boston

by

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III OLIVER

KRAUSE'S philosophy is concerned chiefly with the relation of Masonry to the philosophy of law and government. Oliver's philosophy of Masonry deals rather with Masonry in its relation to the philosophy of religion. In order to understand this we need only note that Krause was by profession a philosopher and that the main work of his life was done in the philosophy of law and of government while, on the other hand, Oliver was a clergyman. As in Preston's case, Oliver's general philosophical ideas came to him ready-made. He flowed with the philosophical current of his time. He did not turn it into new channels or affect its course as did Krause. Hence here, as with Preston, we may conveniently consider Oliver's philosophy of Masonry under three heads: 1. The man; 2. The time; 3. His Masonic philosophy as a product of the two.

1. The man. George Oliver was born at Pepplewick in the county of Nottingham, November 5, 1782. His father was a clergyman of the established church and his mother was the daughter of a country gentleman. Hence he had the advantage of a bringing up under conditions of culture and refinement. He was educated at Nottingham and made such progress that at twenty-one he was made second master of the grammar school at Caistor in Lincolnshire. Six years later he was made head master of King Edward's grammar school at Great Grimsby. In 1813 he took orders but continued to teach. In 1815 he was given a living by his bishop as the result of an examination and at the same time, as the phrase was, was put on the boards of Trinity College, Cambridge, as a so-called ten-year man. That is he was given ten years in which to earn his degree. Thus in 1836 he was able to take his degree of doctor of divinity. In the meantime he was successively promoted to parishes of more and more importance till he became rector of Wolverhampton and prebendary of

the collegiate church. In 1846 the lord chancellor gave him an easier and more lucrative living. He died in 1866 at the age of eighty four.

Beginning in 1811 Oliver was a diligent student of and a prolific writer upon antiquities, particularly ecclesiastical antiquities and his writings soon brought him a high reputation as an antiquary. It is worth while to give a list of the more important of these books since taken in connection with the long list of his Masonic writings it will afford some idea of his diligence and activity. I give only those which have been considered the more important.

1. History and Antiquities of the Collegiate Church of Beverley.
2. History and Antiquities of the Collegiate Church of Wolverhampton.
3. History of the Conventual Church of Grimsby.
4. Monumental Antiquities of Grimsby.
5. History of the Guild of the Holy Trinity, Sleaford.
6. Druidical Remains near Lincoln.
7. Guide to the Druidical Temple at Nottingham
8. Remains of the Ancient Britons between Lincoln and Sleaford.

To these must be added a great mass of papers and notes on antiquarian matters published between 1811 and 1866. And be it remembered the author was, while most of these were writing, a teacher studying during his leisure hours in preparation for orders and later for his degree and when the remainder were written was rector of an important parish, a magistrate, a surrogate for the bishopric of Lincoln and a steward of the clerical fund for his diocese. This sounds like one man's work and a good measure at that. To it, however, we have to add a Masonic literary career even more fruitful and more enduring in its results.

Oliver was made a Mason at the age of nineteen. This statement, startling to the modern Masonic ear, requires explanation. As Masonic usage then stood a "lewis," that is the son of a Mason, might be initiated by dispensation before he came of age. The privileges of a lewis have never been defined clearly. He was supposed to have a right of initiation in precedence over all other candidates. Also in England and France he was supposed to have the right to be initiated at an earlier age, namely eighteen. The constitutions are silent on this point but the traditional custom was to grant a dispensation in the case of a lewis after that age. It is hard to say how far this usage has ever obtained in America. At present it is not recognized. But there is evidence that it obtained in the eighteenth century as, for example, in the case of George Washington who was initiated at the age of twenty. At any rate Oliver became a Mason in this way at the age of nineteen

being initiated by his father in St. Peters Lodge at Peterborough in 1801.

Oliver's father was a zealous and well-informed Mason and a ritualist of the literal school, that is of the type who regard literal expertness in ritual as the unum necessarium in Masonry. Accordingly Oliver was thoroughly trained on this side--which indeed is indispensable not only to Masonic advancement but, I suspect, to Masonic scholarship--and as a result of his thorough knowledge of the work and his tireless activity his rise in the Craft was rapid.

In 1809 Oliver established a lodge at Grimsby where he was the master of the grammar school and chiefly by his exertions the lodge became strong and prosperous. He was master of that lodge fourteen years. Thence successively he became Provincial Grand Steward (1813); Grand Chaplain (1816); and Deputy Grand Master of Lincolnshire (1832). The latter office he held for eight years. It should be remembered that the post of Provincial Grand Master was reserved in England for the nobility. It is interesting to know in passing that the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts gave him the honorary title of Past Deputy Grand Master.

The list of Oliver's Masonic writings is very long. He is the most prolific of Masonic authors and on the whole has had the widest influence. He began by publishing a number of Masonic sermons but presently as one may suspect by way of revolt from the mechanical ritualistic Masonry to which, as it were, he had been bred he turned his attention to the history and subsequently to the philosophy of the Craft.

His first historical work is the well-known "Antiquities of Free Masonry: comprising illustrations of the five grand periods of Masonry from the creation of the world to the dedication of King Solomon's temple." This was published in 1823.

Then followed in order:

2. The Star in the East, his first philosophical work, designed to show the relation of Masonry to religion.
3. Signs and Symbols, an exposition of the history and significance of all the Masonic symbols then recognized.
4. History of Initiation, twelve lectures on the ancient mysteries in which Oliver sought to trace Masonic initiation and ancient systems of

initiation to a common origin; a matter with respect to which recent anthropological and sociological studies of primitive secret societies indicate that he may have hit the truth much more nearly than we had been supposing of late.

5. The Theocratic Philosophy of Masonry, a further development of his ideas as to the relation of Masonry to religion.

6. A History of Free Masonry from 1829 to 1840, intended as an appendix to Preston's Illustrations of Masonry which he had edited in 1829.

7. Historical Landmarks and Other Evidences of Masonry Explained, by far his greatest work, a monument of wide reading and laborous research.

8. Revelations of a Square, a bit of Masonic fiction.

9. The Golden Remains of the Early Masonic Writers, an elaborate compilation in five volumes.

10. The Symbol of Glory, his best discussion of the object and purpose of Masonry.

11. A Mirror for the Johannite Masons, in which he discusses the dedication of lodges and the two Sts. John.

12. The Origin and Insignia of the Royal Arch Degree.

13. A Dictionary of Symbolic Masonry, the first of a long line of such dictionaries.

14. Institutes of Masonic Jurisprudence.

He also published a "Book of the Lodge," a sort of ritualistic manual similar to the monitors or manuals so well known today. Likewise he was a constant contributor to English and even to American Masonic periodicals.

Probably no one not by profession a writer can show such a list, bearing in mind how many of the foregoing are books of the first order in their class.

Unhappily Oliver's views of Masonic law were not in accord with those which prevailed in England in 1840. In consequence when in that year Dr. Crucefix, one of the most distinguished of nineteenth-century English Masons, was suspended by the Grand Lodge and retired from Masonic activity Oliver also incurred the displeasure of the authorities by claiming the right, though a Provincial Deputy Grand Master, to take part in a public demonstration in honor of Crucefix in which a large number of prominent Masons joined. This led to his losing his office by the action of the Provincial Grand Master and to his withdrawing from active connection with the Craft. But English Masons soon came to see the soundness of Oliver's views as to the independence which Masonry must allow to the individual in his belief and opinion as to what is Masonic law. Accordingly four years later nearly all the Masons in the kingdom joined in subscribing for a presentation of plate to Oliver in recognition of his great services to the Craft. But justice was not done to Oliver as it was to Preston possibly because Oliver was not the type of man to urge it for himself as Preston would have done. In consequence Oliver was out of touch with active Masonic work for the last twenty two years of his life. That this was in no way due to improper obstinacy on his part is, I think, manifest from merely looking at his portrait--which radiates benevolence and amiability. Moreover all accounts of his personality agree with the impression one gets from the portrait. All accounts bear witness to his lovableness, his geniality, his charitableness and his readiness to oblige. All who have written of him testify that he was in the highest degree unassuming, unaffected and easy of approach. That such men as Krause and Oliver should suffer from the jealousies which greater knowledge seems to engender in those who regard ability to recite the ritual with microscopic fidelity as the sum of Masonry is not wholly to be wondered at. The breadth which such knowledge inevitably brings about threatens the very foundations of the literalism which the strongest men in our lodges have been taught or have taught themselves is the essence of the institution. But it is strange and is an unhappy commentary upon human nature that the arrogant, ambitious Preston could at length obtain justice which was denied to Krause and to Oliver.

Summing up Oliver's personality, everything confirms the impression which one derives from the portrait. He was a warm-hearted man, of zealous antiquarian enthusiasm, of deep faith and of thoroughgoing religious convictions. We must remember each of these traits when we come to consider his philosophy of Masonry. So much for the man.

Now for the time.

The dominant philosophy everywhere when Oliver wrote was what is known as romanticism. In England, which at this period was still primarily taken up with religious rather than with philosophical or scientific questions, romanticism was especially strong. Thinkers of the generation after Kant objected to his critical philosophy on the ground that it lacked vitality. They asserted that the living unity of the spirit was violated by his analyzing and distinguishing. They pointed to religious faith on the one hand and to artistic conception and creation on the other hand as methods which unlike the critical philosophy did full justice to life. In other words the age of reason in which Preston wrought and wrote was over and for a season at least men ceased to expect all things of reason, intellect and knowledge and began to expect all things of what they called spirit. The younger thinkers especially were filled with enthusiasm at this idea of deducing all things from spirit and did not see that they were simply seeking for a new philosopher's stone. They expected through the idea of the spirit to establish a complete unity of all things, to break down the existing separation between science, religion and art and to reconcile all discords. Such an idea of knowledge rightly may be called romantic. It stands before us sublime and distant. It rouses our enthusiasm or our zeal to achieve it, and influences us by its exaltation rather than by any prospect which it affords us of clear and sober realization. That a whole generation should have been content to put its ideal of knowledge in this form seems difficult to explain even by reaction from the over-rationalism of the preceding century. Probably the general upheaval brought about by the French Revolution must be taken into account and the golden age of poetry which accompanied this philosophical movement must not be overlooked. Indeed the connection between the romantic philosophers, the romantic poets and the romantic musicians is very close. It is not an accident that what I may fairly call romantic Masonry appears at the same time. This will be manifest especially when I come to speak of Oliver's views as to the relation of Masonry to religion.

One of the most representative of the German romantic philosophers argued that all separation between poetry, philosophy and religion was superficial and arbitrary. He argued that while the poet regards philosophy as an expounding of the poetry of life which is to be found in all things, the philosopher regards poetry as a pictorial form, perceived intuitively, of the thought which moves in all things. But, he said, religion is a phase of the same quest for unity. Let me quote his words since they bear strongly upon Oliver's views: "If it is allowed that the task of thought is to show us the unity of all things, can

philosophical endeavor differ in its essence from the religious yearning which likewise seeks to transcend the oppositions and unrest of life ?"

This romantic philosophy came into England chiefly through the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) who wrote while Oliver's chief literary activities were in progress and died about six years before the most important and significant of Oliver's writings. The relation of the one to the other is so clear that a moment's digression as to Coleridge is necessary.

In his youth Coleridge tells us he had been a disciple of the eighteenth-century rationalists. But he was repelled by the attempt, so characteristic of the eighteenth century, to reduce mental phenomena to elementary functions by means of analysis and to discover mechanical laws for all consciousness. If this could be done, he said, it would destroy the unity and activity of the mind. At this time he came in contact with the German romantic philosophy and turned in the new direction. Indeed he was a romanticist by nature. He revelled, it has been said, in ideas of the absolute in which the differences and oppositions of the finite world blended and disappeared. He was a poet and a preacher rather than a thinker and rarely got beyond intuition and prophecy. Hence there is more than a little truth in the saying of one of his critics that he led his generation through moonshine to orthodoxy and to a more pronounced orthodoxy than had formerly obtained. It is said that the Anglo-Catholic or Puseyite movement of the nineteenth century, which carried Newman and so many other English scholars into the church of Rome, was a result of Coleridge's ideas.

What, then, were the characteristics of the philosophy of the time and place in which Oliver wrote ?

1. Speculation and imagination were the chief organs of thought. The poetic passed for the only real. Enthusiasm passed for scholarship.
2. Reason abdicated for a season. Conviction, intuition and faith were regarded as justifying themselves.
3. In the same way tradition became something which justified itself. This is seen particularly in the so-called Oxford movement and the Catholic reaction in England. It is seen also in the position of the time as to the English constitution which Dickens has satirized in the person of Mr. Podsnap.

4. Reconciliation of Christianity with philosophy became a recognized problem. For example, Coleridge took this for his chief work.

All of these features may be seen in Oliver's Masonic writings. The defects of his historical writing, for example, which have utterly debased popular Masonic history are the defects of a romanticist. A warm imagination and speculative enthusiasm carried him away. In common with his philosophical teachers he had thrown off the critical method and had lost the faculty of discriminating accurately between what had been and what he would like to believe had been. On the other hand, in Masonic philosophy, where pure speculation was allowable, these qualities had a certain value. Mill says of Coleridge that his was one of the great seminal minds of his time. In the same way Oliver more than anyone else set men to thinking upon the problems of Masonic philosophy. His style is agreeable. He is always easy to read and often entertaining. A multitude of readers, who would be repelled by Krause's learned but difficult pages, have rejoiced in Oliver. Hence he has given a form and direction to Masonic speculation which still persist.

Turning to Oliver's philosophy of Masonry three important points may be noted: 1. His theory of the relation of Masonry to religion; 2. His theory of Masonry as a tradition coming down to us from a pure state prior to the flood; 3. His theory of the essentially Christian nature of our institution.

Let me take these up in order.

1. It has been said that reconciliation of knowledge with religion and unifying of religion with all other human activities was a favorite undertaking of the romantic philosophy. It was natural, therefore that a clergyman should be attracted to this type of thought and that a zealous churchman and enthusiastic Mason who had learned from Preston, whose book he edited, that Masonry was knowledge, should convert the problem into one of relating Masonry to religion and of reconciling them. Oliver's mode of doing this was highly ingenious. Religion and Masonry, he would say, are identical in their end and they are identical in their end with knowledge. Each is a manifestation of the spirit, the absolute, that is of God. God, he would say, is manifest to us, first, by revelation and thus manifest we know Him and know ourselves and know the universe through religion. Second, He is manifest to us by tradition, and in this way we know Him and know ourselves and know the universe through Masonry. Third, He is manifest to us through reason, and in this way we know Him and know

ourselves and know the universe through knowledge or, as we have come to call it, science. In common with the romantics he sought to throw the entire content of life into one interconnected whole; and this he found in God or in the absolute. Accordingly to him Masonry was one mode of approach to God, the other two being religion and science. If Krause's triad was law, religion, morals, given effect by state, church, Masonry, Oliver's is revelation, tradition, reason, expounded, handed down, developed and interpreted by religion, Masonry and science.

2. Oliver's theory of Masonry as a system of tradition seems to have been derived from Hutchinson. The latter deserves a moment's digression.

William Hutchinson (1732-1814), an English lawyer, is perhaps the earliest Masonic philosopher. In 1774 by permission of the Grand Lodge, which then insisted upon a right to censor all Masonic writing, Hutchinson published his chief Masonic work entitled "The Spirit of Masonry." Oliver himself has said that this book was "the first efficient attempt to explain in a rational and scientific manner the true philosophy of the order." Hutchinson's doctrine was that the lost word was symbolical of lost religious purity due to corruptions of the Jewish faith. He held that the master's degree symbolized the new law of Christ taking the place of the old law of Judaism which had become dead and corrupt. By a bit of fanciful etymology he derived Hiram (Hiram) from the Greek heuramen (we have found it) and Acacia from the Greek alpha privative and Kakia (evil)--Akakia, freedom from evil, or freedom from sin. Thus, he says, the Master Mason "represents a man under the Christian doctrine saved from the grave of iniquity and raised to the faith of salvation." Hutchinson influenced Hemming, who wrote the lectures of the Ancients and a trace of this influence may be seen in America in the interpretation of the blazing star in our lectures.

Clearly enough Oliver got his cue from Hutchinson. But Hutchinson had identified religion and Masonry. This Oliver, as a clergyman of the established church, could not allow. Instead Oliver sought to unify them, that is while keeping them distinct to make them phases of a higher unity, to make them expressions of what is ultimately, though not immediately, one. This he did as has been seen by regarding each as a mode of approach to God. That conception led to his theory of Masonry as a body of tradition.

Briefly stated Oliver's theory is this. He held that Masonry was to be found as a body of tradition in the earliest periods of history as

recorded in Scripture. This tradition according to his enthusiastic speculations was taught by Seth to his descendants and was practiced by them as a pure or primitive Masonry before the flood. Thus it passed over to Noah and his descendants and at the dispersion of mankind was divided into pure Masonry and spurious Masonry. The pure Masonry passed through the patriarchs to Solomon and thence to the present institution. On the other hand, the pure tradition was corrupted among the pagans and took the form of the mysteries and initiatory rites of antiquity. Accordingly, he held, we have in Masonry a traditional science of morality veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols.

3. Again taking his cue from Hutchinson, though the old charges to be true to holy church gave him some warrant--Oliver insisted that Masonry was strictly a Christian institution. He believed of course that Christianity was foretold and in a way revealed in the Old Testament and that the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, was clearly expounded therein. In the same way he held that the earliest of Masonic symbols also taught the doctrine of the Trinity and that the Masonic references to the Grand Architect of the Universe were references to Christ. Indeed in his system this was necessary. For if religion, which to him could mean only the Christian religion, and Masonry were to be unified it must be as setting before us different manifestations of the same God. There could be but one God and that triune God, the God of his religion, he held was made known to us by revelation, by tradition and by reason. Thus Oliver's interpretation of revelation determined his interpretation of the other two. If we bear this in mind we may accept his general philosophy without accepting this particular doctrine. For it needs only to postulate a more universal and more general religion than he professed, a religion above sects, creeds and dogmas to hold that such a religion along with Masonry and along with reason leads to God. Moreover Hindu and Mahomedan may each put his own interpretation on revelation and join in believing in these three modes of knowing the absolute. Mackey reproaches Oliver for narrowness and sectarianism. But the possibilities of his Masonic philosophy are as broad as could be desired. It was too soon in 1840 to ask a clergyman to go further in its application than he went.

What then are Oliver's answers to the three fundamental questions of Masonic philosophy?

1. What is the end of Masonry, for what does the institution exist? Oliver would answer, it is one in its end with religion and with science.

Each of these are means through which we are brought into relation with the absolute. They are the means through which we know God and his works.

2. How does Masonry seek to achieve its end? Oliver would answer by preserving, handing down and interpreting a tradition of immemorial antiquity, a pure tradition from the childhood of the race.

3. What are the fundamental principles by which Masonry is governed in achieving its task? Oliver would say, the fundamental principles of Masonry are essentially the principles of religion as the basic principles of the moral world. But in Masonry they appear in a traditional form. Thus, for example, toleration in Masonry is a form of what in religion we call charity; universality in Masonry is a traditional form of what in religion we call love of one's neighbor.

As has been said, Krause's was a philosophy of Masonry in its relation to law and government. Preston's was a philosophy of Masonry in its relation to knowledge. Oliver's is a philosophy of Masonry in its relation to religion. Neither of the others has had a tithe of the influence which Oliver's philosophy has exerted upon Masonic thought. And on the whole his influence has been valuable and stimulating. A critic has said that "all he had to give was transcendental moonshine which shed a new light on old things for many a young doubter and seeker, but which contained no new life." In a sense this is so. Oliver's Masonic philosophy is an obvious product of a clergyman in the age of the romantic philosophy who had read and reflected upon Hutchinson. And yet it is not true that there is no new life in Oliver. Except for Krause nothing so well worth while has been pointed out for Masonry as the end which Oliver found for us. I cannot but feel that it is a great misfortune that his philosophy is being peddled out to a new generation in grandiloquent fragments through Grand Lodge orations and articles in the Masonic press instead of being apprehended as a whole.

THE SACRAMENT.

"The Holy Supper is kept, indeed,
In whatso we share with another's need;
Not what we give, but what we share,
For the gift without the giver is bare;
Who bestows himself with his alms feeds three—
Himself, his hungering brother, and Me."
--J. R. Lowell. The Vision of Sir LaunfalI

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