

# Masonic Renaissance

by Tony Pope

In recent years the feeling that there is something missing in Masonry has spread among Masons throughout the English-speaking jurisdictions. Some are beginning to define what is missing and how to restore it, resulting in several initiatives worldwide that are linked and not mutually exclusive. Among the foremost of these are European Concept lodges, Traditional Observance lodges, the Masonic Restoration Foundation and the Cornerstone Society. These, and others, will be illustrated or referred to in this and subsequent issues of *Harashim*.

**European Concept** lodges began with Lodge Epicurean in Victoria, and have spread (thinly) to other jurisdictions in Australia and overseas. The ethos of this movement was explained in Kent Henderson's 'Back to the Future—a prescription for Masonic renewal' (in *AMRC Proceedings* 1994, *Masonic Inspirations* 1994, revised in *Millennial Masonry* 2002). These lodges require a higher standard of admission, ritual performance, education and understanding, attendance and participation, and dining, thereby extending the time between degrees and requiring higher fees. They do not, however, meet nearly as often as European lodges, nor do they encourage ritual or debate in the European manner.

**Traditional Observance** lodges are an initiative of the American-based Masonic Restoration Foundation and its president, Dennis Chornenky, <<http://www.masonicrestoration.com>>, described as:

similar to European Concept lodges in that they also incorporate higher dues, festive boards, a strict dress code, and higher standards of ritual, but differ in that they choose to follow a close observance of the traditional initiatic elements of Continental European Freemasonry.

This observance is characterized by a solemn approach to holding stated communications and conferring degrees, the use of the Chamber of Reflection as part of the initiation ceremony, longer time between degrees, and the requirement for candidates to present a paper before the lodge on the lessons of their degree prior to advancement.

The same website defines *Masonic Formation* as:

The ever continuing process of spiritual and intellectual formation that all Freemasons must undergo in order to improve themselves in Masonry. This term differs from Masonic Education in that it refers to a process of growth concerned with much more than intellectual faculties.

Masonic Formation is the process of fitting the rough ashlar of our imperfect being into the perfect ashlar fit for the divine temple. It is a constant transformation through the use of Masonic symbols, rituals, and teachings.

There are Traditional Observance lodges within the mainstream structure in California, Kansas, Louisiana, Minnesota and Oklahoma, and 'supporting' (ie sympathetic but not completely identical) lodges in the District of Columbia, Indiana, New York, Ohio and Texas.

The Foundation requires great diplomacy in pursuing its aims among the jurisdictions, and proclaims:

The Masonic Restoration Foundation requires that Traditional Observance lodges fully adhere to their local Grand Lodge regulations. Due to the nature of the regulatory differences between Grand Jurisdictions it must be recognized that some of the above practices may not be able to be adopted in some jurisdictions and it is the duty of the lodges to ensure their compliance with all regulations. If certain practices are not allowed or are impractical for the lodge, alternatives can be discussed.

It has substantial support in some jurisdictions, notably in California where it has been announced:

The Grand Lodge of California, with assistance from the Masonic Restoration Foundation, has been hard at work developing an integrated program to facilitate a new approach to Freemasonry throughout its jurisdiction. Because the history of Masonic Education in California, and most North American jurisdictions, has generally been episodic, incomplete and often inaccurate, a large part of California's solution includes integration of the following:

- public, prospect and applicant information
- candidate education and ritual instruction
- membership retention, education and development
- leadership training
- greater cooperation with academia
- development of new *Masonic Formation Committees* for lodges
- development of high quality educational events at lodge and state-wide levels
- and training and certification to ensure that only qualified Masons will lead and coordinate the implementation and establishment of the new program at all levels

The new approach is called *Masonic Formation*, and refers to the notion that becoming a Mason is a broad, life-long experience. While Masonic Education refers to academic and historical learning, *Masonic Formation* refers to the overall intellectual and moral development of the Freemason. Research conducted by the Masonic Restoration Foundation and information available to the Grand Lodge has indicated that this is the kind of experience that the average man joining the Fraternity today is seeking. Because California Masons have responded so positively to fundraising calls for the new program the Grand Lodge projects that more than half a million dollars will be raised towards its development and implementation over the next three years at the current rate of support.

Masons are voluntarily donating money for their own spiritual and intellectual self-improvement? Wow! They must be serious.

Three *Masonic Formation* booklets, one for each Craft degree, are available online at <[http://www.freemason.org/members\\_education.php](http://www.freemason.org/members_education.php)>.

Members of the Council of the Masonic Restoration Foundation include: Thomas W Jackson, Executive Secretary of the World Conference of Grand Lodges and Past Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania; John L Cooper III, Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of California; and S Brent Morris, editor of *Heredom*, Grand Abbott of the Society of Blue Friars and author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Freemasonry*.

Lower-key activities towards a similar end are evident in Canada and the USA with the *Knights of the North* <<http://www.knightsofthenorth.com/forum/>> and their online 'dictionary' at <<http://masonicdictionary.com/>>. The 'dictionary' is an alphabetical collection of articles of varying lengths; particularly recommended are those under A, B, E, F, and M. Prominent among the authors of these articles are: Stephen Dafoe, of Fiat Lux Lodge of Research (Alberta), author of 'Reading, Writing and Apathy'; and Christopher Hodapp, of Lodge Vitruvian (Indiana), author of *Freemasons for Dummies* and editor of 'Laudable Pursuit'.

The following papers are available online at <<http://www.vitruvian.org/papers/>>:

- Dafoe, Stephen A: 'Reading, Writing, and Apathy: The Rise and Fall of Masonic Education' (PDF)
- Henderson, Kent: 'Back to the Future: A Prescription for Masonic Renewal (The 'European Concept' Lodge Model)'
- Mackey, Albert G: 'Reading Masons and Masons Who Do Not Read'
- Smith, Dwight L: 'Whither Are We Traveling?' (PDF)
- Smith, Dwight L: 'Why This Confusion In The Temple?' (PDF)
- Smith, Dwight L: Editorials referred to in 'Whither Are We Traveling?' (PDF)
- The Knights of the North: 'Laudable Pursuit: A 21st Century Response to Dwight Smith' (PDF).

**The Cornerstone Society** is the English approach to the same problem; it seeks to involve individual Masons rather than the lodges. It was formed in 1999, under the chairmanship of the Marquis of Northampton, ProGM, to 'promote understanding of the meaning and purpose of Freemasonry'. Membership is open to all Master Masons of the English Constitution, and the Society is administered by a self-perpetuating committee which includes John Hamill, Matthew Scanlan, Michael Baigent & Julian Rees (*Freemasonry Today*) and Martin Faulks (Lewis Masonic). The Cornerstone Society organises conferences on a semi-annual basis, reports the conferences on its website, <<http://www.cornerstonesociety.com>>, and provides many of its papers in PDF format. It also provides speakers at private lodges on request, and has organised a lecture tour by Brent Morris in November.

The most recent conference was in June this year in London, as 'The Rays of Heaven', reported on the website thus:

The 2006 Summer Conference, sponsored by Lewis Masonic, was held in London at Freemasons' Hall on Saturday 24 June. George Francis, Chairman of the Cornerstone Society, opened proceedings by welcoming those present, including the Pro Grand Master, Lord Northampton, and promised a thought-provoking and enjoyable afternoon.

We were fortunate to have three excellent speakers. David Sims drawing on his experiences of life in the Far East challenged us as to whether we took the '*search for the genuine secrets*' of a Master Mason seriously and asked us what was getting in the way. The spiritual nature of Freemasonry is a bit like sex – there is not a lot of point in just talking about it! Trevor Stewart spoke about how we can re-engage members through challenging and meaningful activities in Lodge. Ritual is important, but merely rehearsing it is not enough. He took us back to the 18th century and described the typical activities in Lodges at the time. He gave examples of how he had employed various techniques based on these to successfully stimulate discussion and learning at Masonic meetings. Kai Hughes brought together the various strands which speakers at previous conferences had raised over the past 6 years. He attempted to discover if there were any clues and common threads as to why we seem to have problems in Freemasonry today and asked the question, 'what is the psychology of Freemasonry?' Next came the 'Panel' which, as usual, produced a lively discussion. Finally, the Cornerstone team, assisted by Russell Race, gave a ritual workshop which focused on the Third Degree and the deeper messages and symbolism contained therein. George Francis closed the formalities by thanking those present for supporting the event and reminding them of the Northern Conference on 11 November in Salford, Greater Manchester, and the Cornerstone / Brent Morris Lecture tour also taking place in November 2006.

To date, only the first of these papers has been published on the website.

### Warning

Clearly, there is interaction between these groups, and reciprocal links on the websites. However, there are other sites with links to the Masonic Restoration Foundation and the Cornerstone Society, or to the brethren or organisations associated with them, which are not reciprocated and do not necessarily imply approval by the Foundation or the Society. For example, the so-called Grand Lodge of All England <<http://www.grandlodgeofallengland.org/>> links with another rebel body, the United Grand Lodge of America <<http://www.GrandLodgeUSA.org>>, <<http://www.modernfreemasons.org/>>, which leads to the dissident Georgia lodge, the Rose Cross of Gold <<http://www.rrcg.org/>> and its adjunct <<http://www.tracingboard.com/>>, which completes the circle by linking back to the English rebels, BUT ALSO leads to mainstream organisations such as the United Grand Lodge of England, Lodge Vitruvian (Indiana), the Philaethes Society, the Masonic Service Association of North America and the useful 'lodge improvement' website <<http://www.nmlusa.org/>>, which in turn leads to Kent Henderson, Thomas W Jackson, Bruno Gazzo (Pietre-Stones), Nelson King and the Philaethes Society.

It's just as well we were taught to be cautious.