

Illuminati - Catholic Encyclopaedia.

Illuminati

The name assumed by the members of a **secret society** founded by **Adam Weishaupt** in **1776**.

History

Weishaupt was born of **Westphalian parents** at **Ingolstadt** (Bavaria), on 6 February, 1748, and lost his father in 1753. Although educated at a Jesuit school, he fell early under the influence of his **free-thinking** godfather, the director of the high-school of Ickstatt, to whom he owed his appointment as professor of civil law at the University of Ingolstadt in 1772. He was the first layman to occupy the chair of canon law at this university (1773), but, in consequence of the growing **rationalistic** influence which he exerted over the students both in his academic capacity and in his personal intercourse with them, he came into ever sharper collision with the loyal adherents of the **Church** and with those who were influential in government circles. As, furthermore, his obstinate nature led him to quarrel with almost everyone with whom his intercourse was at all prolonged, he felt the need of a powerful secret organization to support him in the conflict with his adversaries and in the execution of his **rationalistic** schemes along **ecclesiastical** and political lines. At first (1774) he aimed at an arrangement with the **Freemasons**. Closer inquiry, however, destroyed his high estimate of this organization, and he resolved to found a new **society** which, surrounded with the greatest possible secrecy, would enable him most effectually to realize his aims and could at all times be precisely adapted to the needs of the age and local conditions.

His order was to be based entirely on **human nature** and observation; hence its degrees, ceremonies, and **statutes** were to be developed only gradually; then, in the light of experience and wider knowledge, and with the co-operation of all the members, they were to be steadily improved. For his prototype he relied mainly on **Freemasonry**, in accordance with which he modelled the degrees and ceremonial of his order. After the pattern of the **Society of Jesus**, though distorting to the point of caricature its essential features, he built up the strictly hierarchical organization of his society. "To utilize for good purposes the very means which that order employed for evil ends", such was, according to Philo (Endl. Erkl., 60 sq.), "his pet design". For the realization of his plans, he regarded as essential the "despotism of superiors" and the "blind, unconditional obedience of subordinates" (ibid.), along with the utmost secrecy and mysteriousness. At the beginning of 1777 he entered a **Masonic** Lodge and endeavoured, with other members of the order, to render **Freemasonry** as subservient as possible to his aims. As Weishaupt, however, despite all his activity as an agitator and the theoretic shrewdness he displayed, was at bottom only an unpractical bookworm, without the necessary experience of the world, his order for a long time made no headway. The accession to it, in 1780, of the **Masonic** agent Freiherr von Knigge (Philo), a man of wide experience and well known everywhere in **Masonic** circles, gave matters a decisive turn. In company with Weishaupt, who, as a **philosopher** and jurist, evolved the ideas and main lines of the constitution, Knigge began to elaborate rapidly the necessary degrees and statutes (until 1780 the Minerval degree was the only one in use), and at the same time worked vigorously to extend the order, for which within two years he secured 500 members. When the great international convention of **Freemasons** was held at Wilhelmsbad (16 July to 29 August, 1782) the "Illuminated Freemasonry", which Knigge and Weishaupt now proclaimed to be the only "pure" **Freemasonry**, had already gained such a reputation that almost all the members of the convention clamoured for admission into the new institution. Particularly valuable for the order was the accession of Bode (Amelius), who commanded the highest respect in all **Masonic** circles. Assisted by Bode, Knigge laboured diligently to convert the whole **Masonic** body into "Illuminated Freemasons". A number of the most prominent representatives of **Freemasonry** and "enlightenment" became Illuminati, including, in 1783, Duke Ferdinand of Brunswick, the foremost leader of **European Freemasonry** and the princely representative of the illuminism of his age. Other famous members were **Goethe**, **Herder**, and **Nicolai**. The order was also propagated in **Sweden**, **Russia**, **Poland**, **Denmark**, **Hungary**, **Austria**, and **France**. But in 1783 dissensions arose between Knigge and Weishaupt, which resulted in the final withdrawal of the former on 1 July, 1784. Knigge could no longer endure Weishaupt's pedantic domineering, which frequently assumed offensive forms. He accused Weishaupt of "Jesuitism", and suspected him of being "a **Jesuit** in disguise" (Nachtr., I, 129). "And was I", he adds, "to labour under his banner for mankind, to lead men under the yoke of so stiff-necked a fellow?--Never!"

Moreover, in 1783 the **anarchistic** tendencies of the order provoked public denunciations which led, in 1784, to interference on the part of the Bavarian Government. As the activity of the Illuminati still continued, four successive enactments were issued against them (22 June, 1784; 2 March, and 16 August, 1785; and 16 August, 1787), in the last of which recruiting for the order was forbidden under penalty of death. These measures put an end to the corporate existence of the order in Bavaria, and, as a result of the publication, in 1786, of its degrees and of other documents concerning it--for the most part of a rather compromising nature--its further extension outside Bavaria became impossible. The spread of the spirit of the Illuminati, which coincided substantially with the general teachings of the "enlightenment", especially that of France, was rather accelerated than retarded by the **persecution** in Bavaria. In two letters addressed to the **Bishop** of Freising (18 June and 12 November, 1785) **Pius VI** had also condemned the order. As early as 16 February, 1785, Weishaupt had fled from Ingolstadt, and in 1787 he settled at Gotha. His numerous apologetic writings failed to exonerate either the order or himself. Being now the head of a numerous family, his views on religious and political matters grew more sober. After 1787 he renounced all active connexion with **secret societies**, and again drew near to the **Church**, displaying remarkable zeal in the building of the **Catholic** church at Gotha. he died on 18 November, 1830, "reconciled with the **Catholic Church**, which, as a youthful professor, he had doomed to death and destruction"--as the chronicle of the **Catholic parish** in Gotha relates.

Objects and organization

As exhibiting the objects and methods of the order, those documents are authoritative which are given in the first and second sections of works in the bibliography. The subsequent modifications of the system, announced by Weishaupt in his writings after 1785, are irrelevant, since the order had spread far and wide before these modifications were published. The above-named documents reveal as the real object of the Illuminati the elaboration and propagation of a new popular religion and, in the domain of politics, the gradual establishment of a universal democratic republic. In this **society** of the future everything, according to Weishaupt, was to be regulated by reason. By "enlightenment" men were to be liberated from their silly prejudices, to become "mature" or "moral", and thus to outgrow the religious and political tutelage of **Church and State**, of "priest and prince". Morals was the **science** which makes man "mature", and renders him conscious of his dignity, his destiny, and his power. The principal means for effecting the "redemption" was found in unification, and this was to be brought about by "secret **schools** of wisdom". These "schools", he declares, "were always the archives of nature and of the **rights** of man; through their agency, man will recover from his fall; princes and nations, without **violence** to force them, will vanish from the earth; the **human race** will become one **family**, and the world the habitation of rational beings. Moral **science** alone will effect these reforms 'imperceptibly'; every father will become, like Abraham and the **patriarchs**, the **priest** and absolute lord of his household, and reason will be man's only code of law" ("Nachtr.", p. 80 sq.; repeated verbatim in Knigge, "Die neuesten Arbeiten", p. 38). This **redemption** of **mankind** by the restoration of the original "freedom and equality" through "illumination" and universal charity, fraternity, and tolerance, is likewise the **true** esoteric **doctrine** of Christ and his Apostles. Those in whom the "illuminating" grace of Christ is operative (cf. **Hebrews 6:4**) are the "Illuminati". The object of pure (i.e. illuminated) **Freemasonry** is none other than the propagation of the "enlightenment" whereby the seed of a new world will be so widely scattered that no efforts at extirpation, however violent, will avail to prevent the harvest ("Nachtr.", pp. 44, 118; "Die neuesten Arb.", pp. 11, 70). Weishaupt later declared (Nachtrag zu meiner Rechtfertigung, 77 sqq., 112 sqq.) that **Masonry** was the school from which "these ideas" emanated.

These objects of the order were to be revealed to members only after their promotion to the "priestly" degree (Nachtr., I, 68). The preliminary degrees were to serve for the selection, preparation, and concealment of the **true** "Illuminati"; the others were to open the way for the free religion and social organization of the future, in which all distinction of nations, creeds, etc., would disappear. The government of the order was administered by the superiors of the Minerval "churches", "provincials", "nationals", and "areopagites" (who constituted the supreme council), under the direction of Weishaupt as general of the order. Members were acquainted only with their immediate superiors, and only a few trusted members **knew** that Weishaupt was the founder and supreme head of the order. All the members were **obliged** to give themselves a training in accordance with the aims of the **society**, and to make themselves useful, while the order, on its part, pledged itself to further their interests by the most effectual means. They were especially recommended to systematically observe **persons** and **events**,

to acquire **knowledge**, and to pursue scientific research in so far as it might serve the purposes of the order. Concerning all persons with whom they had intercourse they were to gather information, and on all matters which could possibly affect either themselves or the order they were to hand in sealed reports; these were opened by superiors unknown to the writers, and were, in substance, referred to the general. The purpose of this and other regulations was to enable the order to attain its object by securing for it a controlling influence in all directions, and especially by pressing culture and enlightenment into its service. All illuministic and official organs, the press, schools, seminaries, cathedral chapters (hence, too, all appointments to sees, pulpits, and chairs) were to be brought as far as possible under the influence of the organization, and princes themselves were to be surrounded by a legion of enlightened men, in order not only to disarm their opposition, but also to compel their energetic cooperation. A complete transformation would thus be effected; public opinion would be controlled; "priests and princes" would find their hands tied; the marplots who ventured to interfere would repent their temerity; and the order would become an object of dread to all its enemies.

Concerning the influence actually exerted by the Illuminati, the statements of ex-Freemasons - L.A. Hossman, J.A. Starck, J. Robinson, the **Abbé Barruel**, etc. - must be accepted with reserve, when they ascribe to the order a leading role in the outbreak and progress of the French Revolution of 1789. Their presentation of facts is often **erroneous**, their inferences are untenable, and their theses not only lack proof, but, in view of our present knowledge of the French Revolution (cf., e.g., Aulard, "Hist. pol. de la Rév. Franç.", 3rd ed., 1905; Lavissee-Rambaud, "Hist. générale", VIII, 1896), they are extremely improbable. On the other hand, once it had discarded, after 1786, the peculiarities of Weishaupt, "Illuminationism" was simply the carrying out of the principles of "enlightenment"; in other words, it was **Freemasonry** and practical **Liberalism** adapted to the requirements of the age; as such it exerted an important influence on the **intellectual** and social development of the nineteenth century.

Sources

The documents, unquestionably genuine, that originated within the order and were published by the Bavarian government: *Einige Originalschr. des Ill. Ordens* (confiscated from Zwack) (Munich, 1787); with *Nachtrag* (seized from Baron Bassus) (in 2 parts, 1787); also documents made public through other agencies and recognized as genuine by Knigge and Weishaupt: *Der echte Illuminat* (Edessa, 1788); *Illuminatus dirigens oder schottischer Ritter* (1794); SPARTACUS AND PHILO (KNIGGE), *Die neuesten Arbeiten* (1794); PHILO, *Endliche Erklärung* (1788).

Declarations by members who left the order: COSANDEY, RENNER, AND GRÜNBERGER, *Drei merkwürdige Aussagen* (1786); IDEM (with UTZSCHNEIDER), *Grosse Absichten des Ill. Ordens*, with three appendices (1786).

In defence of the order: WEISHAUPT *Apologie der Illuminaten* (Frankfort and Leipzig, 1787); IDEM, *Vollständige Gessch. d. Verfolgung der Illuminaten in Bayern* (Frankfort and Leipzig, 1786); IDEM, *Pythagoras, oder Betrachtungen über die geheime Welt- and Regierungskunst* (1790).

Against the order or otherwise concerning it: STÄTTLER (Weishaupt's colleague at Ingolstadt), *Das Geheimniss der Bosheit des Stifters des Ill. Ordens* (1787); PRESTON, *Illustrations of Freemasonry* (1856); MOUNIER, *De l'influence attribuée aux Philosophes, aux Franc-maçons et aux Illuminés sur la révolution Française* (1822); JARCKE, *Vermischte Schriften*, II (1839); DESCHAMPS-JANET, *La société et les sociétés*, II (3rd ed., 1880), 93 sqq., 115 sqq.; III (1883), 34 sqq.; WOLFRAM, *Die Illuminaten in Bayern u. ihre Verfolgung* (1899-1900); ENGEL, *Gesch. des Ill. Ordens* (1906) (rich in documents, but favourable to Weishaupt); *Hist-polit. Blätter* (1889), I, 926-41 (official list of Illuminati).

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