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From Masonic Author and "Righteous Gentile" to Catholic Evangelist: An Examination of the Protean Discourse of Dudley Wright

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This document contains the script for a paper I delivered at an international study day for European Freemasonry, held at the Belgian Museum of Freemasonry on 27 March 2013. A more comprehensive examination of the life and discourse of Dudley Wright is currently in preparation, which will include footnotes with detailed source citations, a comprehensive bibliography, and a list of archival sources (i.e. unpublished letters and manuscripts by Dudley Wright).

I would like to talk to you today about Dudley Wright. The main focus of this paper will be his shifting discourse about Judaism and Catholicism. My intention today is neither to prove, nor disprove, his various claims, which would require a much longer paper, but simply to examine his discourse as a Freemason, and how it changed after he abandoned Freemasonry.

I will begin with a little biographical information. Dudley Wright was born in Chelsea in 1868 and he died in 1949. His mother was from a Scottish family and his father was from East Anglia. He was initiated to the Eccleston Lodge in London on the 20th November 1912. He was elected as a member of the Fratres Calami Lodge, a lodge that was set up solely for the secretaries of other lodges, on the 30th September 1918. And he joined the Wellesley Lodge in March 1928.

Dudley Wright is today a relatively unknown character. When his name is recognized, it is generally by those interested in the traditions, legends and history of Freemasonry. However, he was a prolific author who wrote on diverse subjects. For example, in addition to his works on Freemasonry, he also published many articles and books on comparative religion. Jews and Judaism featured prominently, but also

Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Druidism, and various mystical traditions. He also published articles and books on myths and legends. These ranged from discussions about legends regarding King Solomon and the Great Temple, to a somewhat esoteric study on the history of the Vampire myth. According to a short biographical entry for him in 1919, his professed goal was to "trace the unvarying basis from the philosophic standpoint of all religious systems." He published well over a dozen books and hundreds of articles in several periodicals, including, to name but a few examples, the *Freemason*, the *Masonic News*, the *Jewish Guardian*, the *Jewish Chronicle*, the *Islamic Review*, the *Bible Review*, and *Our Lady of Sion*. He was also the editor of the *Freemason* and the *Masonic News*.

Whilst Dudley Wright admired Judaism, and wrote a number of positive articles about Jews, he was not Jewish. He described himself in a letter to the *Jewish Chronicle* in 1910 as, quote, "a Gentile (though not a Christian)." Wright published a book and several articles which were critical of Roman Catholicism. Nevertheless, sometime between 1931 and 1933, he embraced Catholicism. It is difficult to pin down the exact date of his transition from Freemasonry to Catholicism. The periodical that he edited, the *Masonic News*, came to an abrupt end in July 1931. His membership to the Wellesley lodge ceased in the same year. His membership to the Eccleston Lodge was terminated automatically on the 1st November 1932 as a result of "non-payment of fees." In 1932 and 1933, he started to write letters and articles for Catholic periodicals, such as the *Catholic Times* and the *New Blackfriars*. He published a booklet in February 1933, which provided a religious guide for pilgrims making the trip to Rome to celebrate a Holy jubilee. Though the exact date remains a matter of speculation, it therefore seems likely that Wright abandoned Freemasonry in the latter

half of 1931, or 1932, and embraced Catholicism shortly thereafter. He joined the Catholic Guild of Israel, an organisation dedicated to the conversion of the Jews, on the 28th October 1933. It is interesting to note that even though he was not Jewish, he was listed in the Guild membership book as a "convert from Judaism." This may not have been a mere careless slip, as it was not uncommon for Judaism and Freemasonry to be linked and equated in the English Catholic discourse at that time.

His discourse changed significantly after he embraced Catholicism. In a letter sent on the 12th February 1934 to Sister Mary Pancratius, a member of the Catholic Guild of Israel and the head of the Sisters of Sion in London, Dudley Wright explained that when he was, quote, "reconciled to the Church," his previous literary occupation was one that he "was unable, as a Catholic, to retain." He expressed the necessity of finding acceptable new topics, as writing was his primary "means of existence." The result was a series of publications that contained traditional stereotypes and myths about Jews, and which staunchly defended the Church against accusations of anti-Judaism. The rest of this paper will examine the shifting nature of Dudley Wright's discourse.

Representations of "the Jew" and "Judaism" (1923 – 1932)

Prior to embracing Catholicism, Wright published a number of articles about Jews, Judaism and Jewish Freemasons. The earliest was a short article published in October 1923 in the *Jewish Guardian*. This short article observed that it was astonishing that a Masonic Lodge in America had recently refused to initiate a Jewish candidate, not only because of the universalism of Freemasonry, but because of the "prominent part which Jewish lore and legend plays in Masonic history, ritual and tradition." Wright

argued that the legends, traditions and symbols of Freemasonry are Jewish in origin and interpretation, and have the Great Temple as their source. Wright also pointed out that, quote, "in England there has never been any bar against the admission of Jews, nor indeed, against any candidates professing a Theistic belief, with, or without the Trinitarian appendage." It was, he suggested, only in a handful of countries that Jews struggled to gain admittance to Freemasonry, such as Germany. In another short article in October 1925, this time in the *Jewish Chronicle*, he observed that whilst the Lodge of Tranquillity in London was somewhat reserved when it came to blowing its own trumpet, it was one of the foremost lodges in terms of its good works. He pointed out that its members were mostly of the Jewish faith.

In April 1928, Wright published an article about "Jews and Freemasonry" in the *Masonic News*, and in 1930, he published a booklet entitled "The Jew and Freemasonry." These repeated the content of his earlier article in the *Jewish Guardian*, but with lots of new information about Jewish members of Masonic lodges. He argued that "there can be no action or attitude more illogical than for individual Freemasons or a Masonic Lodge, ... to attempt to bar the initiation of candidates adhering to the Jewish faith ... solely on account of the religion they profess." Wright argued that Jewish mysticism was "almost as old as the Jewish religion and some of the most learned Rabbis ... devoted their lives to the decipherment of the sacred treasures engraven in symbolical language on the tablets of the Law." It was, he concluded, quote, "their love for learning, their fame for wisdom and their reputation for sanctity that acted as a vitalizing influence upon the whole of the Jewish race."

In 1932, Wright published a book on the Talmud. His professed aim was to dispel, quote, "some of the ignorance that prevails in non-Jewish circles" about the Talmud, and to throw, quote, "some light upon the history and contents of that wonderful [text]." The first twelve chapters provided an overview to the Talmud. His examination was full of praise. He used words such as "wonderful" and "mysterious" to describe the Talmud, and suggested that "above all, one of the values of the Talmud lies in the fact that it teaches that religion is not a thing merely of creed or dogma, or even faith, but of goodness in activity." "Judaism," he observed, "is more than a religion *with* ideals; it is a religion *of* ideals." He contended that no "quarrel" can be found with the claim that, quote, "the Talmud is an inexhaustible mine, embodying the purest gold and the most precious of stones; its maxims and its ethics instil the teachings of religion and morality of the very highest order." The final and longest chapter of this volume examined the history of "the burnings of the Talmud." Wright examined incident after incident of the confiscation, censorship, purging and mass destruction of the Talmud, from the thirteenth- to the eighteenth-century. He argued that in nearly every case the approval of the Pope, or the Inquisition, could be found. These are just a selection of his most significant works about Jews and Judaism, but he wrote several other short articles about Jews and Jewish traditions prior to embracing Catholicism.

Wright received a mixed reception from Anglo-Jews. In 1921, the *Jewish Guardian* was highly dismissive about his attempts, in a book entitled *Masonic Legends and Traditions*, to, "parade a first-hand acquaintance with Rabbinic literature," although it did acknowledge that despite his Talmudic "lapses," the "author gives evidence of wide and patient reading in unfamiliar sources." The review concluded with equivocal

praise, observing that his study "at least stimulates the reader's imaginative faculty." On the other hand, his examination of the Talmud in 1931 received significant and unequivocal praise. Herbert Loewe, Reader in Rabbinics and Hebrew at Cambridge University, praised Wright's study of the Talmud and recommended it for undergraduate students and the general reading public. Wright was described by Rabbi Dr Isidore Epstein, a prominent Anglo-Jewish communal leader and rabbinic scholar, as a *righteous gentile*. "The general reader," he explained, "will be greatly beholden to him for having spread out before him a wealth of information on the literary and historical side of the Talmud; while Jewish readers will be particularly grateful for the author's admirable and moving survey of the burning of the Talmud."

Representations of "Catholicism" (1908 – 1932)

The earliest reference to Catholicism in Wright's discourse can be found in a volume published in 1908, which argued that Jesus was an Essene. According to Wright, there is some evidence that Jesus was influenced by Eastern religions such as Buddhism. In support of this, he observed that a recently discovered manuscript, "a copy of a chronicle of a life of Jesus," showed that Jesus spent a period of his life in India and Nepal. He observed that this chronicle was so contrary to Catholic belief, that a Cardinal tried to pressure the discoverer of the chronicle to bury his research. Wright concluded that Catholicism "bears little or no resemblance to the teaching of Jesus."

In 1921, Wright published no less than nine articles which were highly critical of Catholicism, and in 1922, he published a book based on these articles. These examined numerous incidents, publications and declarations of anti-Masonic hostility by Catholic laymen, priests, bishops, and cardinals. It quoted at length from

encyclicals and pastoral letters by several popes, each of which condemned Freemasonry, and prohibited Catholics from being members of Masonic lodges under the threat of *ipso facto* excommunication. According to Wright, "for nearly two hundred years, the heads of the Roman Catholic Church have been launching their papal thunders against Freemasonry, alleging that it is not only anti-Christian, but Atheistic," and responsible for many of the wars and revolutions that have shook the nations. Wright argued in a series of letters and articles throughout the 1920s, that the Catholic Church was engaged in biter warfare against Freemasonry.

Representations of "the Jew" and "Judaism" (1933 – 1938)

Wright embraced Catholicism at some point between 1931 and 1933, and joined the Catholic Guild of Israel, an organisation dedicated to the conversion of the Jews, on the 28th October 1933. In February 1934, Wright wrote a letter to Sister Mary Pancratius to explain that he was working on a book which he proposed to call "Judaism v Rome: Pagan and Papal." The book was never published, but he enclosed with his letter a 36 page draft manuscript for a chapter on "the Spanish Inquisition and the Jews." Whilst Wright was by no means totally uncritical of persecutions of Jews in this draft chapter, and the corruption of the Spanish Inquisition, he was now inclined to find reasons to defend anti-Jewish measures. He repeated traditional stereotypes about Jewish usury and power, observing that "the Jews had become rich, powerful and dominant, particularly in financial affairs." Wright also referred to Jewish conspiracies. For example, he stated that in 1485, quote, "a conspiracy of the Jews was discovered at Toledo, the object of which was nothing less than the seizure of the city on Corpus Christi Day and the murder of all the Christians." It has been proved, he asserted, "that the Jews of this period were guilty of the most abominable

practices." "There is also little doubt," he observed, "that the spirit of superiority and arrogance, which has always been, more or less, a characteristic of the Jew in power, was evidenced here."

In Spring 1934, Wright wrote an article entitled "Some Papal Edicts against Judaism." In this article, Wright defended a number of edicts, such as those prohibiting Jews from employing Christians. Furthermore, whereas previously Wright fervently defended the Talmud at great length, he now expressed concerns about it. "There was," he argued, quote, "abundant justification for the reiterated condemnations of the *Talmud*." According to Wright, there were passages in the medieval Talmud which, quote, "contained the most abominable and scurrilous statements concerning Our Blessed Lord and overlaying His Mother with vile accusations."

Most of the arguments that were first made in his unpublished draft chapter on the Spanish Inquisition and his article on papal edicts against Judaism, were repeated in a booklet entitled *The Catholic Church and the Jews*, which was published in 1935. However, in addition to the Talmud, he now claimed that Jewish liturgy and literature in general contained passages demonstrating "venomous hatred" towards Jesus. In this booklet, as he had previously, Wright repeatedly quoted prominent Jewish scholars, such as Cecil Roth and Israel Abrahams, sometimes distorting or taking their passages out of context, to lend credence to his claims. This was not always appreciated by the Jewish scholars. Whilst his earlier article on papal edicts, published as it was in the journal of the Catholic Guild of Israel, went unnoticed by the *Jewish Chronicle*, a reviewer in the newspaper did notice the new booklet, and accused Wright of "distorting the statements of the Jewish authorities whom he

quotes so extensively." This resulted in a heated exchange between the reviewer and Dudley Wright. The controversy concluded with Cecil Roth writing a letter to the *Jewish Chronicle*, which criticised Dudley Wright for taking his observations out of context, and distorting their meaning.

Conclusion

It seems clear that Wright's transition from Freemasonry to Roman Catholicism was accompanied by a significant shift in his discourse. I think it is very reasonable to categorise him during his time as a Freemason as a staunch and unequivocal admirer of Jews and Judaism. Conversely, his Catholic discourse contained hostile stereotypes and myths about Jews. It is however only fair to point out that he also said things in praise of Jews, though much less so than previously. For example, in a letter to Sister Pancratius, he observed that he had "always found among the Jews a great respect for the Catholic Faith and for Catholics in themselves." And in an article about the conversion of a rabbi to Catholicism in the fourteenth century, he observed that "the Jews have always paid a high tribute to learning." His main concern seems to have been to find a way to transform his writing into a form acceptable to the Catholic Guild of Israel, and in settling on defending the Church from accusations of anti-Judaism, he sometimes slipped into hostile caricatures. It would be more accurate to describe his discourse about Jews and Judaism during this phase as ambivalent rather than consistently hostile.

This brings me to the end of this paper, but I would be remiss if I didn't say something, albeit in passing, about the final years of his life. Wright's transition from

Freemasonry to Catholicism was not the only significant change in his life and discourse. Sometime in the early 1940s, he abandoned Catholicism, embraced Islam, and took the name Muhammad Sadiq Dudley Wright. From 1944 to 1948, he published approximately twenty articles in a periodical entitled the *Islamic Review*. This was a journal that he had previously published in as a Freemason, and significantly, many of the ideas that he admired in Islam in the 1940s when he adopted the religion were exactly the things he had praised in Islam back in 1916. Many of his articles in the *Islamic Review* were highly critical of Christianity. Prior to embracing Catholicism, he was critical of the doctrine of the Trinity and referred to Jesus as a prophet. He now returned to this practice. On the one hand he praised the teachings of the Prophet Jesus, but he suggested that Christianity had, unlike Islam, departed from Jesus' teachings. "The Word," he asserted, "is not lost but it has been smothered by the Christian Church." He stated that the Truth, as preached by Jesus, is not to be found in the Christian Church but it is to be found … in Islam, in the Mosque." He argued that the exponents of Christianity prefer to follow the will of man, expressed for example in "Papal decrees," rather than the expressed will of God." It is "small wonder," he concluded, "that Christianity has proved so ghastly a failure." He argued that "what is sorely needed in the Christian world is the undiluted teaching of Jesus," which is to be found "in Islam." Whilst he praised Jesus' teachings, he argued that his mission was limited in scope compared to the more universal mission of the Prophet Muhammad. He portrayed Jesus' mission as being solely to the "Lost sheep of the House of Israel," and furthermore, he contended, his mission was a failure, as the Jews rejected him and cried out for his crucifixion. As he had as a Freemason, he argued in 1944 that many religious systems "have Truth for their base and that at base, … are practically identical." In 1947, he concluded that

Islam was the only religion that recognized the shared faith of "all the prophets of the world," and that recognized the "truth in all religions." As I observed at the beginning of this paper, his personal goal as a Freemason seems to have been to trace the common philosophical and faith elements of all religious systems. It would seem that he returned to this goal in the 1940s, but he now believed it was only achievable through Islam. Whilst he was willing to see the positive in all religions, he was very critical of Christianity, and he did place Islam on an irreproachable higher plane, with other religions only gradually moving towards the perfection of Islam. As he died in 1949, it is difficult to say whether he found in Islam, or would have found given more time, the answers he was looking for, or whether he would have yet again turned in frustration to another religious system.