



A Primer on the Illuminati

*One of the most frequent “experts” on the subject to appear in Internet searches is New Age guru David Icke, who posits that the Illuminati are shape-shifting reptilian humanoids from the star system Draco! However, it is possible to separate the absurd and the misleading from that which is true. And in this case it is particularly important to do so. For, as distinguished historian James H. Billington, a Rhodes Scholar who has been the Librarian of Congress since 1987, illustrates in his comprehensive and thoroughly documented 1980 study *Fire in the Minds of Men: The Origins of the Revolutionary Faith*, it is from “Bavarian Illuminism” that “the modern revolutionary tradition” descends.*



In 1996, we asked the outstanding American expert on Bavarian Illuminism and revolutionary movements, William H. McIlhany, to provide a brief survey of the history and influence of the Order of the Illuminati based on the most reliable documentary sources. McIlhany, a noted author and historian, has appeared on The History Channel, The Discovery Channel, and many other television and radio programs. His detailed scholarship on the Illuminati, secret societies and subversive movements over the past 40 years — long before Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code* and *Angels & Demons* made them the subject of bizarre speculation and popular comic-book caricature — has involved research in the British Museum and Ingolstadt (now Eichstadt) University in Bavaria. His personal library of rare and primary source documents and scholarly literature on these subjects is perhaps the most extensive private collection in the United States. In 1986 he founded the Individualist Research Foundation. He is the author of five books, including *Klandestine* (1975), which helped to bring a murderer to justice as dramatically portrayed in the 1996 movie *Ghosts of Mississippi*.

The following essay first appeared in the September 16, 1996 issue of The New American under the title “Two Centuries of Intrigue,” accompanied by a three-page annotated bibliography.

Centuries of Intrigue

Down through the ages there have been many secret societies and conspiratorial movements that had as their goals absolute rule of the world, overthrow of all existing governments, and the final destruction of all religion. It is possible with much study to trace the origins and developments of many such movements: The early anti-Christian mysticism of the Gnostics; the conspiracy against orthodox Islam founded by Hasan Saba in Persia in 1090 AD as the Order of the Assassins; the apostate Order of the Knights Templar, whose heretical leaders imitated the Assassins’ system for the destruction of Christianity.

From the 13th through the 17th centuries such groups as the Luciferians, Rosicrucians, and the Levellers continued the war against Christianity that had begun in Europe with the Templars. Because a



Written by [Denise Behreandt](#) on June 12, 2009

few organizational links can be found, it is even possible to establish that some of these groups were not merely imitating each other or some older system of belief. Many of these earlier movements, however, have left very fragmentary evidence, so it is not possible to trace from 1100-1700 any continuing organizational structure which was engaged in a coordinated and centrally controlled plot for world rule.

Early Associations

By the middle of the 18th century, remnants and parallels of various destructive movements began to associate under a central group which was to create a continuing organizational structure that would someday, its founders hoped, rule the world after all existing religions and governments had been destroyed. As Abbé Augustin Barruel documented in his invaluable study [Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism](#), the intellectual base for this movement was laid in the mid-18th century by Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, and other members of the Paris Academy. This fraternity, which sought the destruction of Christian-style civilization, referred to itself grandly as the “Philosophes.”

Voltaire’s influence over King Frederick of Prussia and the publication of Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*, beginning in 1751, testified of the Philosophes’ early success. The conspirators hoped that the *Encyclopédie* would become a standard reference source wherein every literate person would seek knowledge on all subjects and thus receive propaganda against civil order and the Christian religion. Its publication caused the influence of this group to grow rapidly.

Voltaire bore an implacable hatred of all religions, of all monarchs, and of all morality derived from religious belief. He was obsessed with a fiendish desire for the total destruction of all three. He ended all his letters with the battle cry, “Let us crush the wretch! Crush the wretch!” The “wretch” to whom he referred, of course, is Christ and His Church. Christians, said Voltaire, are “beings exceedingly injurious, fanatics, thieves, dupes, imposters ... enemies of the human race.” In the war against Christianity, according to Voltaire, “It is necessary to lie like a devil, not timidly and for a time, but boldly and always.”

Enter the Illuminati

Inspired by the radical Philosophes and instructed by a mysterious occultist named Kölmer from what is now Denmark, Adam Weishaupt, a professor of Canon Law at the University of Ingolstadt (in Bavaria, Germany) established a continuing organizational structure to direct the worldwide attack on religion and monarchy — a structure which would, he hoped, eventually rule the world. The organization Weishaupt founded on May 1, 1776 was called the Order of the Illuminati.

Weishaupt planned for the Order to maintain publicly the image of a charitable and philanthropic organization. It was this image which attracted so many German educators and Protestant clergymen to the Order. When they joined they were convinced that the goal of the Order was the purest form of Christianity, to make of all mankind “one happy and prosperous family.” Once enlisted as novices or “Minervals” in the Order, those who were prepared for deeper commitment were allowed to advance to the rank of Illuminatus Minor, where they were told that the only obstruction to the Order’s goal of universal happiness was the power being held by the religious and governmental institutions of the world. Accordingly, the leaders of these institutions — monarchs (or future monarchs) and clergymen — had either to be brought under the control of the Order or destroyed. If such a prospect frightened the new Illuminatus Minor, he was kept inactive at this level until his ethical concepts were altered.

As Weishaupt stated, “These [ruling] powers are despots when they do not conduct themselves by its



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[the Order's] principles; and it is therefore our duty to surround them with its members, so that the profane may have no access to them. Thus we are able most powerfully to promote its [the Order's] interests. If any person is more disposed to listen to Princes than to the Order, he is not fit for it, and must rise no higher. We must do our utmost to procure the advancement of Illuminati into all important civil offices."

After the candidate had proven his absolute devotion to the secrets of the Order, he was allowed to enter the top-level circle of initiates as an Illuminatus Major, just below the position of Rex held by Weishaupt. By now, all conventional idealism had been purged from the candidate and he was told about the real objectives of the Order: rule of the world, to be accomplished after the destruction of all existing governments and religions. He was now required to take an oath which bound his every thought and action, and his fate, to the administration of his superiors in the Order.

But Weishaupt did not simply rely on the sincerity of his disciples. He set up an elaborate spy network so that all members would constantly be checking on the loyalty of each other. The secret police of the Order killed anyone who tried to inform the authorities about the conspiracy. This band was known as the "Insinuating Brethren" and had as its insignia an all-seeing eye.

The structure of the Order was pyramidal, with Weishaupt at the top. Beneath him were two or three immediate subordinates, each of whom had three men under his orders; each of those three had several men who carried out his dictates; and so on. In their correspondence, Illuminists were required to use code names for themselves. Weishaupt called himself Spartacus; others were Cato, Marius, Brutus, Pythagoras, Socrates, and Hannibal. Weishaupt, who had been raised and educated by the Jesuits before rebelling against them, adopted much of the organizational system of the Jesuits for his Order.

As a reward for selling himself totally to the Order, the top-level Illuminatus (of which there were few) was granted all the material and sensual benefits that could possibly be obtained. Weishaupt intended that "the power of the Order must be turned to the advantage of its members. All must be assisted. They must be preferred to all persons otherwise of equal merit. Money, services, honor, goods, and blood must be expended for the fully proved Brethren."

This intricate conspiratorial structure among the economic, social, political, and cultural elite in Bavaria was tremendously successful: Within two years after the founding of the Order, all but two of the professorial chairs at the University of Ingolstadt were held by members of the Order. Furthermore, it is estimated that before 1789 there were at least 2,000 members of the Order in the German-speaking lands. Many of these were ministers, lawyers, doctors, and even a few princes. None were members of the lower classes, the agricultural working masses, or the serfs. The influence of the Order on German education and the German clergy was devastating. By 1800 many German ministers no longer believed the most basic tenets of Christian doctrine. They had been converted to the worship of "reason."

Widening Influence

The original writings of the Order included detailed instructions for fomenting hatred and bloodshed between different racial, religious, and ethnic groups — and even between the sexes. The idea of promoting hatred between children and their parents was introduced. There were even instructions about the kinds of buildings to be burned in urban insurrections. In short, virtually every tactic employed by 20th-century subversives was planned and written down by Adam Weishaupt over 200 years ago.

It was not until the summer of 1782 that the Order really began to grow in power and influence outside



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Bavaria. Having already contemplated the possibility of infiltrating the freemasonic bodies of Western Europe and then taking control of them, Weishaupt and his brilliant disciple, Baron Adolf von Knigge (Philo), at last had their chance. During that summer, leaders and delegates of the continental European freemasonic bodies met in a congress held in Wilhelmsbad. Acting as Weishaupt's agent, von Knigge joined them and offered enticing promises of the secrets that the Illuminati had to offer.

Von Knigge persuaded many of the German and French delegates to join Weishaupt's movement, and they extended the influence of the Order into their individual lodges. The two leaders of German freemasonry, Duke Ferdinand of Brunswick and Prince Karl of Hesse, joined the Order, thus bringing the whole of German freemasonry under the control of the Illuminati.

French Connection

Another important new disciple was the French Count Honoré Gabriel Mirabeau, who was brought into the Order while in Germany and who was chosen to take Weishaupt's system to France. Among Mirabeau's most important recruits were the Duke of Orléans (Philippe Egalité), Brissot, Condorcet, Savalette, Grégoire, Garat, Pétion, Babeuf, Barnave, Sieyes, Saint-Just, Desmoulins, Hébert, Santerre, Danton, Marat, Chenier, and just about every other leader in the impending French Revolution.

The Duke of Orléans, leader of the Grand Orient Lodge in Paris, was a key Illuminatus. Through the Grand Orient lodges, the Illuminati created and controlled the Jacobin Club houses in Paris, through which the most violent and subversive revolutionaries were mobilized in anticipation of the revolution; Orléans and the Grand Orient were the crucial intermediary between the French radicals and Weishaupt's directorate in Bavaria. However, even as critical instructions were being transmitted through this network, the Elector of Bavaria uncovered the entire plot.

The discovery of the plot was literally providential: A courier sent from Frankfort to Paris in 1785 was killed by a bolt of lightning. On his body were found incriminating papers about the Order and the name of Xavier Zwack. Zwack's home in Landshut was raided by the Elector's police and his copy of Weishaupt's writings was taken. The Elector publicly outlawed the Order and closed many of the freemasonic lodges known to be under its control. The Elector also sent printed copies of the Order's writings to all of the important monarchs in Europe. It was from copies of the Order's writings that Abbé Barruel in France and the eminent Professor John Robison in England gathered the information contained in their important books — Barruel's [Memoirs](#) and Robison's [Proofs of a Conspiracy](#).

The French Revolution was not a spontaneous uprising of the oppressed masses. In France, the ten years prior to 1789 had seen the development of greater social and political reform by the monarchy than ever before. The lot of the common people had steadily improved and there was no visible discontent due to economic misery. The upheaval was not a chance event, but an orchestrated effort to create a new political order.

The siege of the Bastille on July 14, 1789, an event which has been persistently misrepresented and romanticized, was an excellent example of how the Illuminati stage-managed the events of the French Revolution. Only one out of every thousand people in Paris participated in this "siege." The incident was merely an attempt to obtain the guns and ammunition rumored to be in the Bastille so that those loyal Frenchmen who participated could use the weapons to put down a Jacobin disturbance in another part of Paris. Even though the guards at the Bastille did not know the true motive of the mob, only one of the 15 available cannons was fired at the crowd.

When the mob got inside the prison, they found only seven inmates, all of whom were living quite



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comfortably in this “horrible monstrosity of despotism”: Four forgers; two lunatics who were mad before they were imprisoned; and the Comte de Solages, who was incarcerated for “monstrous crimes” at the request of his family. Needless to say, they found none of the instruments of torture about which they had heard.

Not surprisingly, the clergy was singled out as an object of relentless persecution and eventual extermination. Churches were profaned and prostitutes were worshiped on their altars. The campaign to de-Christianize France included even the creation of a new calendar stripped of religious significance. Assaults were mounted against religious education, and the first conscription for military service was put into effect.

The rule of civil government and authority in Paris dropped to an unprecedented low during the Reign of Terror which began in 1794. The Terror also claimed the lives of many Illuminists as mob violence spun out of control.

Just before his execution in 1794, the Illuminist Robespierre, who had presided over much of the Terror, advocated the systematic extermination of 15 million Frenchmen so that the remaining food supplies would be adequate. Although this prototype ecological “depopulation” program was not fully implemented, the Terror did extinguish the lives of at least 300,000 Frenchmen — 297,000 of whom were members of the middle and lower agricultural and working classes. As always, the “people’s revolution” primarily victimized its alleged beneficiaries.

Suppression and Survival

In 1788, after the suppression of Illuminism in Bavaria, Karl Bahrdt and Baron von Knigge attempted to revive it under the name of the German Union, which soon came to control the book selling and publishing business in the German lands; this assured that only those books on religion, philosophy, and politics which were acceptable to the Order would be available and read by the public. However, it was not until 1810 that the Order was revived in what is now Germany, this time under the name of the *Tugendbund*.

But before then the Illuminists had already attempted to export Jacobin-style revolution to the infant United States. The U.S. was established as a constitutional republic in 1789, the same year the Illuminati’s devastation of France began. Shortly thereafter, agents of the Illuminati, such as French agitator Edward Genet, began organizing insurrectionary and secessionist movements to destroy the American Republic. Their efforts were delayed by widespread public exposure, thanks in no small measure to George Washington, who condemned “the nefarious, and dangerous plan, and doctrines of the Illuminati....” Another memorable warning was offered in a July 4, 1799 address by Timothy Dwight, president of Yale College.

By 1815, Weishaupt’s ambassadors had begun to extend their influence into many parts of the world beyond Bavaria and France. Among the personages and organizations responsible for extending the Illuminati’s infiltration and power throughout Europe were Filippo Michele Buonarroti and his *Sublimes Maitres Parfaits* (Sublime Perfect Masters), and Louis Auguste Blanqui and the *Société des Saisons* (Society of the Seasons). Those two branches of the Illuminati formed the source of the League of the Just, which commissioned Karl Marx to write the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848. Following publication of the *Manifesto*, the League of the Just changed its name to the Communist League. The Illuminists provided the unseen hand behind the staged communist revolts of 1848, which convulsed France, Austria-Hungary, and Russia. This inaugurated the era of communist subversion, infiltration, and



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control of governments across the globe — an era which has not ended, contrary to “polite” opinion.

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