

## **The Symbolism and Origins of Circumambulation**

2018 Recommended LEO Program

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Circumambulation is a Latin phrase deriving of the words *circum* which means around and *ambulātus* meaning to walk. Therefore, it is the act of moving around a sacred object.

In *the Symbolism of Freemasonry*, Brother Albert G. Mackey connects the Craft's tradition of circumambulation with the ancient practice of a "religious rite in the ancient initiations which consisted in a formal procession around the altar, or other holy and consecrated object."

Many sources hypothesize that this practice originated in the days of operative masonry, and was intended to allow the brethren to inspect the candidates to check for any physical defects and be certain of their ability to work.

Circumambulation can be found in the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In the catholic church a priest will sometimes circumambulate the alter or another relic with a thurible of incense three times as a reference to the trinity. In the book of Joshua, the lord told the Israelites to march around the city of Jericho once per day for six days and on the seventh day seven priests should accompany the ark around the city seven times. After the seventh pass the walls of Jericho collapsed and the city was delivered to the Israelites. In Islam, pilgrims circumambulate the ka'aba in Mecca seven time while offering prayer. It is also found in many other religions

In Scottish folklore circumambulation was called diasil or sunwise because sundials were used to tell time. The druids would walk clockwise around their temples by the south always keeping the temple on their right side. This they considered to be the prosperous course.

Greeks called it moving from the right to the right which was the direction of the motion. In ancient Greece during rites of sacrifice the priests would walk around the alter three time while reciting sacred odes or hymns. For the Greeks, it was necessary that the right side of the body was always beside the alter and the circumambulation was always made in a clockwise manner. A hymn of Callimachus which is said to be chanted by the priests of Apollo at Delos can be summarized as "we imitate the example of the sun, and follow his benevolent course."

The structure of many Hindu temples symbolizes the spiritual transition from ordinary daily life to a state of spiritual perfection. The temples are divided into ambulatory passageways where the worshipers path is divided into symbolic stages. They circumambulate these passageways moving from the outer doorway moving towards the inner sanctum. The process is representative of the transition through levels in life approaching the sacred center of spiritual energy of their deity.

The rite of circumambulation predates all the current concepts of religion and derives from a period when men worshiped the sun and the earth as well as the forces of nature. These prehistoric men found their god within nature. They worshiped the sun by building an altar of

stone representing the earth and set a fire on top of it in representation of the sun. Further support for this theory is that ritualistic circumambulation almost always done in a clockwise fashion. East to west by way of the south just as the sun's movement can be observed in the northern hemisphere.

Circumambulation is representative of the sun passing around the lodge, a symbolization of the world.