



# English Learning for Curious Minds



**Member-only content  
Transcript & Key Vocabulary**

Thank you - your ongoing membership makes Leonardo English possible.  
If you have questions we'd love to hear from you: [hi@leonardoenglish.com](mailto:hi@leonardoenglish.com)

---

## Episode #087

### The Illuminati

### 08 Sep, 2020



[00:00:00] Hello, hello, hello and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English, the show where you can listen to fascinating stories and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about The Illuminati, the secretive group that may or may not control the entire world.

[00:00:33] The episodes we've been doing on conspiracy theories seem to be pretty popular, and so today we are going to cover the mother of all conspiracy theories, the conspiracy theory to rule them all, The Illuminati.

[00:00:48] Its believers say that members of the Illuminati include Beyonce, Jay Z, Madonna, as well as hundreds of other secretive, powerful people who **pull the strings**<sup>1</sup> of everything we do.

---

<sup>1</sup> to secretly be in control



## The Illuminati

[00:01:02] So today we are going to take a closer look at who the Illuminati really are, or were, we'll take a look at what we actually know about them for sure, how they got started, where they came from, why they disappeared, why they then reappeared, and we'll then discover why people seem to be so obsessed with them, and why this conspiracy theory just won't go away.

[00:01:30] OK then, let's get started.

[00:01:33] To make things a bit easier, we do actually know about the founding of The Illuminati, this part isn't a conspiracy theory.

[00:01:42] Our story starts in Bavaria, a part of modern day Germany, in 1776, with a man named Adam Weishaupt.

[00:01:52] He was a professor of law and philosophy at a Bavarian university, the University of Ingolstadt, and was the only non-clerical professor, the only professor who wasn't also [ordained](#)<sup>2</sup> by the Catholic church.

[00:02:09] In the 18th century, Bavaria was still very Catholic, very conservative, not the kind of place that was open to new ideas.

[00:02:19] Elsewhere in Europe, the Enlightenment had been [flourishing](#)<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>2</sup> officially given a (religious) position

<sup>3</sup> growing



## The Illuminati

[00:02:24] From new ideas around the role of religion and philosophy to an advanced understanding of scientific and mathematical concepts, new ideas had been [circulating](#)<sup>4</sup> throughout Europe.

[00:02:39] From Francis Bacon to Immanuel Kant, Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Adam Smith, Voltaire to Diderot, these are names that we continue to refer back to today, and have had a huge impact on a lot of modern philosophers, mathematicians, economists, and general thinkers.

[00:03:00] But in 18th century Bavaria, Enlightenment thinking wasn't encouraged. It was considered dangerous, [heretical](#)<sup>5</sup> even, something to be avoided.

[00:03:13] Unknown to his colleagues, Adam Weishaupt, our law professor, had been [devouring](#)<sup>6</sup> the works of Enlightenment thinkers as a boy, and continued to be fascinated by them as a young professor at the University of Ingolstadt.

[00:03:30] He wasn't able to discuss these ideas openly, but was a fierce believer that everyone should have an Enlightenment understanding of philosophy, mathematics, and reason.

---

<sup>4</sup> moving around

<sup>5</sup> a belief that is contrary to a particular religious belief

<sup>6</sup> reading in large quantities, literally 'eating quickly'



## The Illuminati

[00:03:44] With nobody to discuss these ideas with, and nobody with whom to have the kind of conversations that other Enlightenment thinkers were having in the coffee houses of Paris or Oxford, Weishaupt realised he would have to join a secret society.

[00:04:03] Now, secret societies were nothing new. The largest and most well-known one, which you could say doesn't make it that secret, it was called The Freemasons.

[00:04:16] But when Weishaupt approached The Freemasons, he firstly found that they weren't as serious as he had hoped, and on a more practical note, it was very expensive to become a member, and he simply didn't have the money to do so.

[00:04:33] So what do you do when you can't find a secret society that you want to join?

[00:04:38] You make your own one.

[00:04:41] In May 1776, Weishaupt formed his own, secret society.

[00:04:47] It wasn't called The Illuminati; it was called Bund der Perfektibilisten, or Covenant of Perfectibility, or for short, The Perfectibilists.

[00:04:57] You might think this name is a bit weird, and Weishaupt did too, which is why he later changed it to The Illuminati.

[00:05:07] In any case, on the first of May, 1776, Weishaupt got together with 4 students from his university. As you might expect with a secret society, they met in secret, in a dark forest outside the town of Ingolstadt, and carried large torches.

[00:05:28] There and then they decided their own rules and customs.



## The Illuminati

[00:05:33] Their symbol was to be the owl of Minerva, a little owl who in Greek and Roman myths would accompany the Goddess of Wisdom.

[00:05:44] Each new member would need to come from a [reputable](#)<sup>7</sup> family, and be wealthy, but membership was a lot more [select](#)<sup>8</sup> than this.

[00:05:54] Every new member would need to be formally approved by every current member.

[00:06:00] Weishaupt was 28 at the time he formed the Illuminati, which may explain the next rule.

[00:06:07] Every new member had to be under 30 years old.

[00:06:12] The reason for this was apparently that if you were over 30 you were too [set in your ways](#)<sup>9</sup>, you wouldn't be [receptive](#)<sup>10</sup> to the kind of new, Enlightenment ideas that would be discussed by other members of the Illuminati, and so sorry, you couldn't become a member.

[00:06:32] The society had three different levels: Novice, Minerval, and Illuminated Minerval.

---

<sup>7</sup> having a good reputation

<sup>8</sup> small and special

<sup>9</sup> not willing to change

<sup>10</sup> willing to listen



## The Illuminati

[00:06:40] You started as a 'Novice', and then could get promoted by doing things like recruiting other people to join the society.

[00:06:50] As a Novice, you wouldn't know who the other members of the society were, you just knew your immediate **superior**<sup>11</sup>. This was one of the things that helped keep everyone's identities secret, so if one Novice was discovered, that person couldn't **reveal**<sup>12</sup> the names of all the other members of The Illuminati.

[00:07:14] Further to this, every member had a codename, a secret name. Weishaupt's was Brother Spartacus, the famous Roman leader of the slave rebellion of 73 BC.

[00:07:26] Each member was **tasked**<sup>13</sup> with recruiting other, **reputable** candidates to be members, in order to grow the society.

[00:07:36] But for the first couple of years, it grew pretty slowly, only going from 4 to 12 people between 1776 and 1778.

[00:07:49] In order to try to recruit more members, and build up the organisation, but also to see how a secret society worked from within, Weishaupt decided to become a member of the Freemasons, the most famous and established secret society of the time.

---

<sup>11</sup> the person above you in an organisation

<sup>12</sup> make known

<sup>13</sup> given the job (of doing)



## The Illuminati

[00:08:08] He did this in 1777.

[00:08:12] After he was accepted into the Freemasons, he started to recruit people to join his own secret society, The Illuminati. These new recruits would also recruit other Freemasons, and there was quickly a pretty thin line between who was a Freemason and who was in the Illuminati.

[00:08:35] The number of Illuminati members grew, and they spread geographically from their original base in Bavaria to large parts of Western Europe.

[00:08:46] But as the society was secret, and consisted of lots of different, geographically separated [cells<sup>14</sup>](#), keeping everyone [unified<sup>15</sup>](#) was difficult. The very nature of the Illuminati meant that internal divisions arose, and there was quite a lot of infighting, fighting between different members and different [factions<sup>16</sup>](#).

[00:09:12] Several [prominent<sup>17</sup>](#) members of the Illuminati left the society on bad terms, and one, an ex-member called Joseph Utschneider wrote to the Grand Duchess of

---

<sup>14</sup> small units

<sup>15</sup> united

<sup>16</sup> small groups within a larger group

<sup>17</sup> well known



## The Illuminati

Bavaria with a series of [revelations](#)<sup>18</sup> about the Illuminati, a sort of 18th century ‘[exposé](#)<sup>19</sup>’ of the organisation.

[00:09:35] In his letter he claimed that the Illuminati believed that [suicide](#)<sup>20</sup> was legitimate, that religion was an [absurdity](#)<sup>21</sup>, and that the Illuminati were [conspiring](#)<sup>22</sup> with Austria against Bavaria.

[00:09:51] The Duchess immediately told the Duke, her husband, and between 1785 and 1787 he [imposed](#)<sup>23</sup> a series of punishments on secret societies and on the Illuminati, starting with just fines, financial punishments for being a member, and then in 1787, making membership of The Illuminati punishable by death.

[00:10:23] Understandably, being part of the Illuminati lost some of its [allure](#)<sup>24</sup>, it became slightly less attractive if you could be killed just for going to a meeting.

---

<sup>18</sup> secrets that are made known

<sup>19</sup> a story in a newspaper that reveals the truth about something or someone

<sup>20</sup> the act of killing yourself

<sup>21</sup> something that is stupid

<sup>22</sup> planning to do something in secret

<sup>23</sup> officially forced to accept something

<sup>24</sup> attractiveness, appeal



## The Illuminati

[00:10:36] Weishaupt, the original leader of the Illuminati [fled](#)<sup>25</sup>, and the organisation [disbanded](#)<sup>26</sup>, it fell apart.

[00:10:45] Historians are divided over how many members the Illuminati ever had at its [peak](#)<sup>27</sup>, and estimates range from around 650 to 2000. The fact that it was a secret society, and there was no central record, obviously makes finding the true number hard, but it was a lot smaller than most people think.

[00:11:13] So, it was founded on May 1st 1776, and [disbanded](#), at least most reputable historians believe it was [disbanded](#), in around 1785, just 9 years later.

[00:11:27] But if that is the case, you might be asking yourself, why do people still think the Illuminati control the world today?

[00:11:37] Well, if you believe in the conspiracy theory of the Illuminati, then you would probably say that the order never died, and it continued to go from strength to strength, and any historian who says otherwise just doesn't know what they are talking about.

[00:11:54] But there is another view, a more conventional, evidence-based view.

---

<sup>25</sup> escaped

<sup>26</sup> stopped existing as a group

<sup>27</sup> the top, highest point



## The Illuminati

[00:12:00] After the Illuminati [disbanded](#) in the late 18th century, there wasn't really much talk of them anywhere in the world for almost 200 years.

[00:12:10] People weren't even discussing them. They had gone, disappeared, all the original members had died, and there were no new members.

[00:12:19] Then, in the 1960s, in the [freewheeling](#)<sup>28</sup>, anti-authority years, a book came out that was to prove to be [instrumental](#)<sup>29</sup>, [albeit](#)<sup>30</sup> indirectly, in the [resurrection](#)<sup>31</sup> of the Illuminati in popular culture.

[00:12:37] It was called Principia Discordia, and talked about a [parody](#)<sup>32</sup> of a religion, called Discordianism.

[00:12:46] In the book, believers in Discordianism were called on to worship the goddess of [Chaos](#)<sup>33</sup>, and to essentially cause [chaos](#).

---

<sup>28</sup> liberal, not limited by rules

<sup>29</sup> very important

<sup>30</sup> although

<sup>31</sup> when something is brought back to life

<sup>32</sup> a piece of art (e.g. book, film) that copies something else in a funny way

<sup>33</sup> a situation where there is no order and everything is confused



## The Illuminati

[00:12:58] The idea was that the world was becoming too [uptight](#)<sup>34</sup>, too [authoritarian](#)<sup>35</sup>, and causing [chaos](#) would be one way of bringing about social change.

[00:13:11] One man, an American called Robert Anton Wilson, did exactly that.

[00:13:18] He was an editor for Playboy magazine at the time, and his job involved responding to letters from readers. He started to write fake letters, pretending to be a reader, and then he would respond to these letters.

[00:13:38] These letters talked about this group called The Illuminati, saying that they controlled everything that went on in the world.

[00:13:48] To [sow](#)<sup>36</sup> more chaos, he would also send more letters in, that would take an [opposing](#)<sup>37</sup> viewpoint. The idea was to get people thinking, questioning their idea of reality, and [sowing](#)<sup>38</sup> the conspiracy of The Illuminati.

[00:14:07] He then, together with a colleague, turned these letters into a book, called The Illuminatus Trilogy, where he claimed that The Illuminati were this global elite, and were responsible for things like the murder of JFK.

---

<sup>34</sup> strict and not willing to accept new ideas

<sup>35</sup> demanding that people obey the rules (of a country, government)

<sup>36</sup> to do something that will cause a future action

<sup>37</sup> against

<sup>38</sup> see 'sow'



## The Illuminati

[00:14:25] It became a **cult**<sup>39</sup> book, it was turned into a play, and has had a huge influence on writers, artists, and musicians.

[00:14:35] But what it really did is bring the Illuminati back into people's minds, and get people questioning their own reality.

[00:14:45] Even though it was meant to be a fantasy book, this idea that the Illuminati is still very much alive, and that there is a secret society that controls pretty much everything we do, is certainly **alluring**<sup>40</sup>.

[00:15:03] As with almost every conspiracy theory, it's hard to prove that something doesn't exist, especially if it's the most secret, most powerful society in the world.

[00:15:15] Of course you and I don't know about the Illuminati - why would we? We are **mere**<sup>41</sup> normal citizens.

[00:15:24] Perhaps the modern-day equivalent of The Illuminatus Trilogy is Angels and Demons, the book by Dan Brown that came out in 2000 and was all about The Illuminati.

---

<sup>39</sup> very important to a small group of people

<sup>40</sup> attractive, exciting

<sup>41</sup> used to emphasise that something or someone is small and unimportant



## The Illuminati

[00:15:36] Although this book didn't claim to be anything other than fiction, it [reignited](#)<sup>42</sup> the public interest in the order, and conspiracy theorists are now [on the lookout](#)<sup>43</sup> for any sign of anything that might indicate that someone is a member of the Illuminati.

[00:15:57] Given that the [supposed](#)<sup>44</sup> symbols of the Illuminati include a triangle and an eye, these things [crop up](#)<sup>45</sup> quite a lot, they exist a lot in our day to day lives, so understandably, if you want to see signs of the Illuminati, then you will probably see them in much of modern day life.

[00:16:20] Jay Z and Beyonce, for example, are believed by some to be modern-day Illuminati members.

[00:16:27] Both Jay Z and Beyonce often make a sort of diamond sign with their fingers on stage, which according to them is just a sign of Jay Z's record label, but according to conspiracy theorists is a sign that they are both Illuminati members.

[00:16:45] For some people, the fact that millions of people listen to their music and go to their shows doesn't seem to be enough of an explanation of their wealth and success - instead, they must be members of The Illuminati, and the fact that they make this sign proves it.

---

<sup>42</sup> restarted

<sup>43</sup> looking for

<sup>44</sup> claimed by other people

<sup>45</sup> appears



## The Illuminati

[00:17:04] And belief, or at least interest, in the Illuminati seems to have never been higher. Videos about how the Illuminati is real have [racked up](#)<sup>46</sup> hundreds of millions of views on YouTube, Illuminati conspiracy theory pages and groups have hundreds of thousands of members on Facebook, and it seems that this theory isn't going anywhere.

[00:17:31] So, interestingly enough, while Adam Weishaupt, the founder of The Illuminati, the man who started it all in a forest outside Ingolstadt in 1776, wasn't ever able to conquer the world with his ideas while he was alive, and his group never numbered more than a couple of thousand, with the arrival of The Internet and new fantasy books, tens, if not hundreds of millions now believe that the group he started of just him and 4 students now controls everything we do.

[00:18:07] And I think that if he were alive today, he would find that quite surprising.

[00:18:16] OK then, that is it for today's episode on The Illuminati. I hope you have found it interesting - I was going to do a terrible joke about finding it illuminating, but I'll save you that one.

[00:18:28] As always, I would love to know what you thought of today's episode.

[00:18:33] Soon we are going to be launching a smart new forum for you to discuss episodes, so that will be the place to chat with like minded people, but in the meantime, it's me. So I would love to know what you think.

---

<sup>46</sup> got (a large number) of



[00:18:46] You can email hi - hi@leonardoenglish.com.

[00:18:50] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:18:55] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

---



## Key vocabulary

<b>Word</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Pull the strings</b>	to secretly be in control
<b>Ordained</b>	officially given a (religious) position
<b>Flourishing</b>	growing
<b>Circulating</b>	moving around
<b>Heretical</b>	a belief that is contrary to a particular religious belief
<b>Devouring</b>	reading in large quantities, literally 'eating quickly'
<b>Reputable</b>	having a good reputation
<b>Select</b>	small and special
<b>Set in your ways</b>	not willing to change
<b>Receptive</b>	willing to listen
<b>Superior</b>	the person above you in an organisation
<b>Reveal</b>	make known



## The Illuminati

<b>Tasked</b>	given the job (of doing)
<b>Cells</b>	small units
<b>Unified</b>	united
<b>Factions</b>	small groups within a larger group
<b>Prominent</b>	well known
<b>Revelations</b>	secrets that are made known
<b>Exposé</b>	a story in a newspaper that reveals the truth about something or someone
<b>Suicide</b>	the act of killing yourself
<b>Absurdity</b>	something that is stupid
<b>Conspiring</b>	planning to do something in secret
<b>Imposed</b>	officially forced to accept something
<b>Allure</b>	attractiveness, appeal
<b>Fled</b>	escaped
<b>Disbanded</b>	stopped existing as a group
<b>Peak</b>	the top, highest point



## The Illuminati

<b>Freewheeling</b>	liberal, not limited by rules
<b>Instrumental</b>	very important
<b>Albeit</b>	although
<b>Resurrection</b>	when something is brought back to life
<b>Parody</b>	a piece of art (e.g. book, film) that copies something else in a funny way
<b>Chaos</b>	a situation where there is no order and everything is confused
<b>Uptight</b>	strict and not willing to accept new ideas
<b>Authoritarian</b>	demanding that people obey the rules (of a country, government)
<b>Sow</b>	to do something that will cause a future action
<b>Opposing</b>	against
<b>Sowing</b>	see 'sow'
<b>Cult</b>	very important to a small group of people
<b>Alluring</b>	attractive, exciting
<b>Mere</b>	used to emphasise that something or someone is small and unimportant
<b>Reignited</b>	restarted



## The Illuminati

<b>On the lookout</b>	looking for
<b>Supposed</b>	claimed by other people
<b>Crop up</b>	appears
<b>Racked up</b>	got (a large number) of

*We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.*

*What did you like? What could we do better?*

*What did you struggle to understand?*

*You can email us at [hi@leonardoenglish.com](mailto:hi@leonardoenglish.com).*

