

FREEMASONRY AND RELIGION

THE SENSITIVE ISSUES CRUCIAL TO PROSPECTIVE AND PROGRESSING MASONS

This paper is based on the issues confronting a Freemason when explaining the relationship between Masonry and religion in reply to questions by a prospective candidate or a young Mason starting to progress through the various degrees and more specifically the side degrees.

Many worthy candidates are lost to the craft as a result of misunderstandings or misconceptions regarding the effect that Masonic membership will have on their personal religious beliefs and values. Anti Masonic literature is a lot easier to find on the internet than constructive reading material. Even the Master Mason who considers progressing in the side degrees by means of the Royal Arch or the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite is often confronted by malicious or ignorant advice to stay away from the side degrees as it increasingly requires a deviation from your religious beliefs into paganism or even Satanism.

This paper is an attempt to better understand the arguments surrounding this dilemma and to identify a well founded and constructive response to such enquiries from those brethren. The challenge is that we have to explain the importance to new candidates and younger Masons not ever to discuss religion in the lodge, but also to give them the opportunity to ask these questions without fear of being reprimanded.

One of the most important statements to make to a prospective candidate or any person questioning us on religion and Freemasonry; is that Freemasonry is NOT a religion. In "Freemasons for Dummies" the author (Christopher Hodapp, 32nd degree Mason) states at the outset that: "Freemasonry is not a religion and it has no religious dogma that it forces its members to accept. Masons must simply believe in the existence of a Supreme Being whatever they conceive that deity to be."

Should the candidate, however, read "Lodges examined by the Bible" by John R. Rice he will be thoroughly confused. This will be even more confusing if the candidate is not a Christian but follows another religion. Rice goes to great lengths to quote the Bible in order to show that the scriptures forbid Christians to "...yoke up with unbelievers in lodges or to have fellowship and brotherhood with unconverted men." The author classifies all religions other than Christians as "unbelievers" and he refers to those who do not have a saving faith. He states it categorically that anybody who does not believe in Christ the Saviour is already condemned.

The argument is not about Christianity or any other religion being the only correct way in life, it is about reading material that will bring a prospective candidate either to the conclusion that only Christians may be Masons, or that it is a mortal sin for Christian to be Mason. Rice goes on to argue that Masons are forced to take oaths and maintain secrecy that is directly in conflict to what the Christian bible teaches us. He strongly attacks the arguments of Dr Albert G. Mackey in the "Encyclopedia of Freemasonry" where it is stated that:

"The religion of Masonry is not sectarian. It admits men of every creed within its hospitable bosom, rejecting none and approving none for his peculiar faith". According to Rice this is proof that Masonry practices a religion of Paganism. Defining Paganism is not a simple matter and inevitably leads to more complicated explanations of its origins and different interpretations. Searching for a definition on Wikipedia produced the statement that "Paganism is a term that developed among the Christian community of Southern Europe during the late antiquity to describe religions other than their own, Judaism or Islam – the three Abrahamic religions". It is, however, used as a derogatory term by many Christians. Owen Davies explains in his book "Paganism; a Very Short Introduction" that there has been

much scholarly argument as to the origin of the term Paganism. He goes on the state that "...it has also been understood by some to include any non – Abrahamic religions, but this is generally seen as insulting by adherents of those religions".

It is actually difficult to conclude whether Rice would prefer Masonry to be exclusively Christian or whether he condemns it outright.

These are the bits of information a prospective candidate is confronted with, and it is not easy for him to distinguish between experts and idiots.

The confusion does not end with authors on the internet; too often it is made worse by certain members of the candidate's own church. Although the resistance to Masonry membership by Protestant churches has softened somewhat over the years; there is still a substantial number of clergymen and members from these churches who refuse to believe that Masonry is anything other than a sinister secret organisation with no good intentions or morals whatsoever. These sentiments are often used by such people to prevent a family member or friend from joining the Masons.

It is even worse for practicing Catholics. The history of conflict between the Catholic Church and the Freemasons is well documented, but the important issue is the position of the modern church on Masonry. According to Christopher Hodapp in "Freemasons for Dummies", there is confusion over this issue in the Catholic Church.

He states that the Catholic church considers American and English Masons to be *"inoffensive and well – meaning people"* and admits that *Freemasonry is "beneficial to the country, or at any rate quite harmless"*. However, they still object to oaths of secrecy and still consider Masonry a *"rival religion"*.

Canon (Catholic) law was last updated in 1983, and Hodapp regards the fact that Masonry was not mentioned in this rewrite silent permission to Catholics to become members of a regular Masonic lodge. However, it is important to note that Pope Benedict XVI, while he was still Cardinal Alois Ratzinger in charge of the Office of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, wrote that Catholics who become Masons are "... in a state of grave sin and may not receive Communion." Even so, Masonry thrives in predominantly Catholic countries such as Mexico and the Philippines .

The combination of secrecy within Freemasonry and even more secrecy attributed to the Vatican, makes it difficult to assess the accuracy of articles regarding Freemasonry in the Vatican. Steve van Natten, writing as editor of the Blessed Quietness Journal, lists 116 senior clergymen of the Vatican that (according to him) are current or past Freemasons. He details their names, position in the Catholic Church and date of initiation.

Alexander Lucie-Smith is a Catholic priest, doctor of moral theology and consulting editor of the Catholic Herald. In an article dated 30 July 2013 he states that Pope Francis, in a recent press conference, mentions a number of lobbies at work in the Vatican which was of serious concern to him. One of these was the lobby of Freemasons.

According to Lucie-Smith the notion of a lobby of Masons in the Vatican is an old one. He does not state definitively that there are a substantial number of Masons in the Vatican, but there is enough in his and other similar articles to deduct that it is a real concern to the Vatican leaders.

Having all this information at hand would be useful in answering probing questions from prospective candidates, but getting too deep into detail about specific religions would defeat the object. The ultimate aim should be to show the candidate that religion will not be a disqualifying factor as long as he believes in a Supreme Being.

Deepak Chopra in his book "How to know God; the Soul's Journey into the Mystery of Mysteries", gets closer to the crux of the matter when he states that all the questions regarding the how, where, why and what of religion is explained by answering: "For Love". His seven levels of fulfillment is quite similar to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The ultimate state or seventh level according to Chopra, is "Sacred Response; you fulfill your life through wholeness and unity with the divine".

It is important to draw the candidate's attention to the strong moral character of Masonry on order to tie up the argument with religion. It should start with an explanation of why an atheist cannot become a Mason. Albert Pike in "Morals and Dogma" says it as follows:

"The intellect of the Atheist would find matter everywhere; but no Causing and Providing Mind: His moral sense would find no Equitable Will, no Beauty of Moral Excellence, no Conscience enacting justice into the unchanging law of right, no spiritual Order or Spiritual Providence, nut only material Fate and Chance."

It is thus important to understand that all the moral obligations a candidate will have to commit himself to, will find no root if the candidate is an atheist.

Pike strongly argues for brethren loving one another; "*...for that is the whole Law*" He gets even closer to the essence of the Craft when he states that "*He who truly loves his brother respects the rights of his brother; but he does more, he forgets his own.*"

This all leads to sensible conclusions that will be very useful in discussing religion and Masonry with the candidate or young brother:

All religions have one thing in common: Try to do good unto your fellow man.

Masonry promotes the one quality that can cut across all religious and political barriers: TOLERANCE.

Any question in this regard can be satisfactorily brought back to the central theme of TOLERANCE and always trying to have a positive impact on the lives of your fellow men. Joining the brotherhood will just bring you so much closer to a fraternity of men who all practice this moral way of life, irrespective of their differing religions. It is fine to discuss religion as an explanation of why we should all be loving brothers to one another; it is not fine to promote one religion over another.

Wor Bro Joh. v d Merwe

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