

Masonry and Religion

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Freemasonry has never looked for detractors. Enemies of the organization have included the Roman Catholic Church, the Communist Party, the Nazis, and the religious right. It has been denounced by popes and kings, by the ignorant and by those who felt threatened by the fraternity's reputation for secrecy.

Unfortunately, because it has a long history of never answering critics, Freemasonry makes a wonderful target for bigotry.

I've lost count of how many times I have been asked, "Isn't Freemasonry a separate religion?" It is a question that creates a question: "How in the world did anyone come to believe that Freemasonry is a religion?" The basic question has been addressed over and over again: "No, Freemasonry is not a religion."

But, this reply rarely has any impact on non-masons for the simple reason that the defence of Freemasonry is usually directed at other Freemasons, not at the masses who are the targets of the anti-Masonic evangelists. What is obviously needed is a broader audience for the defence.

One point that is confusing to many is the frequent statement by Masonic writers that Freemasons are "religious." They are, but being religious in no way carries with it the concept of being part of a separate religion.

Usually, the allegation that Freemasonry is a separate religion is helped along by one or more blatant falsehoods - for example: the charge that Freemasonry has its own path to salvation through the performance of good works. I never met a Freemason who believed that, nor who would be able to understand how anyone could ever draw such a conclusion. In practice, it is a handy point for anti-masons, who are frequently confronted with "but, if Freemasons are such evil people, how do you explain their free hospitals, language disorder clinics for children, their many, many summer camps for children, their eye-care programmes, their tutoring programs, their homes for the elderly, and all those other Masonic charities?"

The anti-Masonic answer comes back as "the Masonic charities are not beloved by God because the Freemasons teach that good works are the way to salvation. That makes those charities against the will of God." That is sick, but it is what some of them say.

Freemasonry leaves it up to the individual Freemason to choose his pathway to God, and that policy naturally includes no rules, advice, or admonition as to the means of salvation. The Freemason is expected, quite properly, to get that spiritual guidance from his own denomination, which he is encouraged to support with both his energy and his personal finances.

Time after time in various lectures, the Freemason is told never to put his duties and responsibilities to the Masonic fraternity ahead of his duties and responsibilities to his church, to his country, and to his family. As for Masonic charities, whether they are organized major efforts or individual acts of kindness (such as aid to a destitute brother or to his widow and their children) the Freemason is told to make no gift that will offset his duty to care for his own family.

In the ceremonies and lectures that lead to a man being raised to the status of Master Mason, he hears no description of heaven or hell. He hears no religious dogma. He hears no mention of Satan. He is told of no Masonic path to salvation for the simple reason that there is none.

The only religious item in the Masonic lodge is the Holy Book of the initiate's own faith.

Since most Freemasons are Christians, that book is usually the King James Version of the Holy Bible. The initiate may be given a Masonic Bible by his lodge, his friends, or his family, but it varies from other editions and actual scripture by not one single word. It is only a "Masonic" Bible because it also contains a brief history of Freemasonry, or a concordance to relate to certain Masonic ritual or scriptural passages.

In the lecture accompanying the initiation rites of the First Degree, called Entered Apprentice, he is told that how he chooses to worship God is up to his own conscience.

Every meeting of freemasonry opens and closes with prayer. Every meal begins with prayer. Freemasons also offer prayer to charitable endeavours, for bereaved Freemasons and their families, or for a departed brother.

Clearly, one can easily assert that Freemasonry is not a separate religion. It promotes no heaven, no hell, and no means of salvation. There is no "witnessing" or arguing over religious belief in the lodge. There is no religious dogma. It can't be a religion.

Nevertheless, it is frequently charged that the Masonic lodge has its own God, whose name is "The Great Architect of the Universe." That Masonic term is not a name; it is a designation or reference, as are terms beginning with the word "The" - The Almighty, The Creator, The Most High. If it starts with "The," it is not a name, so why do the Freemasons use that designation?

Freemasonry, as its name implies, centres symbolically on the ancient builders of temples and cathedrals. It is natural for groups to fashion a designation for God that relates to their interests. In the military, I attended an outdoor church service conducted by a visiting chaplain, an ordained minister. He referred to God as "Our Supreme Commander-in-Chief in Heaven." The Freemasons often refer to God as the Great Architect of the Universe, but what is wrong with that? The architect is one who plans and brings a structure into being. As a designation for God, the Great Architect of the Universe makes sense, and it means precisely the same thing as the universally popular "The Creator." The slight difference is that the Masonic designation implies that God created the world according to a plan, although there is no Masonic description of what that plan may have been.

Then there is the charge that the Third Degree, that of Master Mason, teaches a Masonic resurrection. That simply is not true, and I have to believe that those who make that allegation are fully aware that it is not true. When, in debates, I have told people who trot out that charge that they are either ignorant of the truth, or deliberately lying, they tend to back off. They change the subject, rather than attempting to prove their point, which they know cannot be done (Their own followers never demand that they prove anything).

A favourite charge is that Freemasonry must be a religion because it has a funeral service, not in place of it. I have attended many military funeral services that took place after the graveside service, and they offer a good comparison. The military is in full-dress uniform, and there is often a squad with rifles who fire a volley into the air above the open grave. The coffin is covered with a flag. After the military salute, the flag is removed from the coffin, folded in the traditional triangular shape and formally presented to the nearest relative of the departed individual before the coffin is lowered and covered.

Does this mean that the military is a separate religion? Of course not. It simply means that a departed brother is acknowledged and honoured by a group of peers. Ask your local policeman if he has ever attended a graveside service for a fallen law enforcement officer. A chaplain who may not be of the same faith as the deceased often conducts the police service. Sometimes hundreds and even thousands of law enforcement officers, who may never have met their fallen brother, will attend the ceremony, which is carried out in addition to the regular religious service. Does this mean that the police department is a separate religion? Of course not. That is exactly the spirit of a Masonic funeral service, and I know from personal experience that widows, parents, and children appreciate the tribute paid to a loved one whom they mourn.

One anti-Masonic charge that really distorts the spirit of the fraternity arises from the fact that when a Freemason takes the oath of loyalty to the Masonic brotherhood, the Masonic symbols of the square and compasses rest on top of the Holy Bible. To the mason-hater, that clearly means that Freemasons put their order above God. If you go into a courtroom tomorrow and place your hand on top of the Bible to take an oath to tell the truth, or to take an oath of office, does the higher position of your hand mean that you are putting yourself above God?

A reverse allegation is that the Freemason must be the anti-Christ because there are no symbols of Jesus in the lodge room. No, there are not. Nor are there symbols there of any other religion. They would not be appropriate to a fraternal society, especially one specifically espoused freedom of religion to the extent of admitting men of all faiths.

A more recent anti-Masonic allegation is based on the fact that masons teach lessons of morality, which they illustrate with the tools of the mediaeval stonemason: for example, the square, the compasses, the setting maul, the level, and the plumb line. These lessons relating to principles such as self-improvement, fair dealing, truthfulness, and charity, are objectionable to some religious leaders because morality is being taught without specific reference to Jesus. They call it "secular humanism." There is no way to answer that charge, because it is based on the concept that without Jesus there is no such thing as moral teaching. Since most of the world's population is not Christian, we can only hope that position is wrong. However, all manner of secular societies encourage their members to live by moral codes, including the Campfire Girls, the Boy Scouts, 4-H Clubs, the American Bar Association, and the American Medical Association (whose codes of ethics could easily be labelled "secular humanism."). As we look at the state of society we live in today, it seems wise to endorse the teaching of moral behaviour by any means whatsoever.

Strangely enough, Freemasonry may be the only organization on the face of the earth that practices, to its detriment, the scriptural admonition to turn the other cheek. Freemasons have suffered generations of abuse stemming from false allegations and rarely have answered back. Freemasons all over the country have shared with me their feelings that it is time for a change, time for Freemasonry to speak out, and I fully agree.

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