

FREEMASONRY: FROM CRAFT TO TOLERANCE

Freemasonry has again come under attack from those who do not like our Fraternity. This response by Bro. M.B.S. Higham, R.N., Grand Secretary of the United Grand Lodge of England talks about our Fraternity in a very straightforward and informative way. Written by Bro. Higham for a British reader, it also has a clear message for the American reader as well.

It's sad to note that from the end of the Second World War until two years ago--individual members of the Craft progressed from what might have been a becoming reticence about their Masonic affairs to an almost obsessive silence. This attitude allowed Freemasonry's critics free rein. No answer was taken as an admission that allegations were true, and Freemasonry's reputation suffered--to put it mildly. It is time the record was set straight, and I am happy to say that in the last two years we have begun to do something about it.

Now what is Freemasonry? It is for most of us a spare time activity but above all it is FUN. After joining for various reasons, we stay Freemasons because we enjoy it, and we really do, in spite of the heavy things I shall have to say in a moment about morality and so on. It demands that we put something into it, and as in everything else in life worth doing, we get something back--not materially; mostly sheer enjoyment.

Some scholars claim that Freemasonry's antecedents run through the mediaeval guilds back to the builders of King Solomon's Temple. Certainly much of its basic mythology comes from the Old Testament, but it is impossible to prove definite links to times of enormous antiquity. It is, however reasonable to see in modern Freemasonry many links, which may be direct, with the ancient craft of the free-stone mason.

These masons were skilled men who had learned their trade (or craft) in a long apprenticeship and assembled in Lodges to build castles or cathedrals and a variety of other buildings in stone. They guarded their trade secrets with prudent care, partly for the good reason, which will be recognized now, of protecting their jobs, and partly because they were proud of the standards of workmanship they could achieve and wanted to maintain them. To guard their trade secrets and the plans of their work they may well have had their own passwords and other means of recognition, and I expect they were, to unqualified strangers, a pretty exclusive bunch, intolerant of outsiders. They looked after their fellow craftsmen, and were bound to give a qualified journeyman a day's paid work or the means to reach a neighboring Lodge which might offer him more lasting employment--a primitive form of charity. We might guess that as respectable craftsmen they tried to ensure that the members of the Lodge were law-abiding citizens, and they would generally have done what they could to avoid political trouble--as any sensible person did in mediaeval times. Religious strife until the Reformation would have been easy to avoid: one Church--no problem.

If modern Freemasonry's roots are indeed among the operatives, there was then a transitional stage in the 1600s when non-operative men were admitted to operative lodges as honorary members or as patrons--and then gradually took over the lodges, using the stonemason's customs and tools as a basis for teaching morality.

Lodges in nearly the modern form were working at the end of the 17th century, for in 1717 four London Lodges, whose origin is charmingly claimed as of 'time immemorial' and therefore must then have achieved at least some antiquity, formed the original Grand Lodge of England. The Grand Lodges of Ireland and Scotland followed in 1725 and 1735, and from these three Grand Lodges have sprung all the other Freemasonry which we accept as regular in the world.

Having dealt with history, we now turn to Freemasonry as it is. Modern Freemasonry has not changed much from its original non-operative form. There are some differences, which I shall mention, but the basic, essential qualifications for membership are unchanged. To be admitted and to remain a Freemason, a man must believe in the Supreme Being--a God (and to stifle Manichean questions the God must be a good one). To begin with in Masonic ritual this God was treated (if that is not too disrespectful a word) in Christian terms (although this did not prevent Jews from being Freemasons from very early times). In the English Craft in a process which started in the middle 1700s and ended in 1816, Christian references were removed from the ritual to enable men of different faiths to take part without compromising their own beliefs. This is practical tolerance, and one of Freemasonry's great strengths. It enables men of all faiths (who might 'otherwise have remained at a perpetual distance') to meet in ordinary friendship. Without interfering in the way in which they practice their religions, it shows how much they have in common.

This requirement of belief in the Supreme Being, and the fact that Masonic ritual contains frequent prayers, does not make Freemasonry a religion. Freemasonry offers no sacraments. If a Christian wants spiritual grace, he must go to church. Similarly, if he wants salvation he must seek it in the practice of his religion. Freemasonry may teach or encourage him to do better, but it does not deal in religion or in religion's ultimate, salvation. Religions have doctrines. Freemasons are forbidden to discuss religion in their Lodges, and so no Masonic doctrinal system is possible. A belief is required, but there is no attempt to prescribe how the belief is to be exercised.

There is no Masonic God--if a Freemason prays to the Great Architect of the Universe (or to the Supreme Being by any of the other respectful Masonic vocatives) he knows that his own belief will translate and direct that prayer to the God he worships. Prayer alone does not make a religion. If it did, some might say that Parliament was religious. (Others might say, 'better if it were'.) Prayer was commonplace when Freemasonry began, and modern Freemasons are very faithful to the old ways.

Freemasonry teaches morality. By this, I mean it encourages men to try to be better, to discipline themselves and to consider their relations with others. In this, again, it is not a religion. Religions encourage morality, too, but they refer it to God. Freemasonry, if you like, deals with morality at ground level, religion takes it upwards.

Freemasonry teaches its moral lessons in a series of ritual dramas--one-act plays, if you like--each with two scenes; first the story or action and then the explanation. The ceremonies of Freemasonry are intensely satisfying to take part in; always different because those involved will change from one time to the next; demanding in that words and actions have to be memorized and deeply impressive to the candidate, because he is the focus of attention of a room full of men who work together to get a message across to him and because the message itself is of compelling interest.

As part of its teaching of morality, Freemasonry invites its members to consider their place in society. It encourages them to practice plain, old-fashioned loyalty to their native country and to respect the law. It is interesting in this context that in the late 1700s after the two Jacobite rebellions and when the country was still racked by political disturbance, Freemasonry was expressly excluded from legislation which proscribed seditious societies. Perhaps we were better understood in those days.

A Freemason is very strongly discouraged from using his membership to promote his own or anyone else's business, professional or personal interests. He knows that the principles of the Craft not only do not conflict with his duty as a citizen or as an employer; or his relations with his local government authority as Councillor or contractor; but should actually improve his performance. Not many associations in the country invite their members to consider their priorities in this way, as Freemasonry does.

"What happens to the Freemasons who cannot maintain high moral standards?" you may ask. Freemasons are human, and are subject to pressures and tensions and may sweat and sin like other people. We take the view that remedies for crimes or civil wrongs or matrimonial differences (all of which may involve morality) lie in court. After this, Lodges are a sort of family in themselves, and like families can and sometimes do exclude those whose moral transgressions make them no longer acceptable. Higher Masonic authority can reprimand or suspend errant Freemasons. Grand Lodge can expel from the Craft. Among all these administrative penalties there may be mercy, not to condone reprehensible conduct, but admitting that there may be another, mitigating side of the story.

Although it is not directly relevant to the main theme, Freemasonry's social side should be mentioned for completeness, and because it is an important part of a Lodge's activities. Most lodge meetings are followed by a meal in varying degrees of formality; many lodges are the basis for informal gathering of their members and families, and as such, are another facet of society.

Super-tolerant, if you like, or prudent if you are more cynical, but Freemasonry takes no part in politics. The discussion of politics in lodges is forbidden (they have plenty to occupy them anyway with Masonic ceremonies and the ordinary business of running a small association) and Grand Lodge will not express any opinion on political matters.

You might wonder why I've said nothing about secrecy. My unspoken theme is that there is very little secret about Freemasonry. Its internal affairs, like those of many associations, are private--and there is nothing wrong with privacy, however unfashionable it may be. There is, however, a great deal that any individual Freemason could tell about the Craft.

Freemasonry is founded either directly or by imitation, on craftsmanship, which is technology to a high standard and gives the modern Freemason a basis of moral stability, which he can add to the spiritual support he draws from his religion.

Freemasonry has a useful place in modern society. We know that we are likely to learn more about ourselves if we talk about Freemasonry so we welcome ordinary interest as a way of helping us explain ourselves better.