

FREEMASONRY AND RELIGION

Freemasonry does not pretend to take the place of religion or serve as a substitute for the religious beliefs of its members. It does, however, require that each member believe in a Supreme Being, a future existence, and the brotherhood of man. How he interprets or elaborates these fundamentals is left to the individual's private judgment and religious faith. Freemasonry expects each person to follow his own faith, and "to place his duty to God...above all other duties."

In the beginnings of Masonic ritual in the early 1700s, God was treated in Christian terms. In English and American Freemasonry, 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. This tolerance is one of our great strengths because it enables men of all faiths to meet in ordinary friendship. Without interfering in the way each Brother practices his religion, it shows how much they have in common.

The requirement of a belief in the Supreme Being and the fact that Masonic ritual contains frequent prayers, does not make Freemasonry a religion. Freemasonry offers no sacraments. Freemasonry does not deal with the ultimate that religion offers: salvation. If a man wants spiritual peace, he must go to his house of worship. If he wants salvation, he must seek it in practicing his religion. Freemasonry may teach or encourage men to do

better. But Freemasonry does not deal in religion. Religions have doctrines. Freemasons are forbidden to discuss religion in their lodges; therefore no Masonic doctrinal system is possible. A belief in the Supreme Being is required, but Masonry does not attempt to prescribe how the belief is to be exercised or practiced.

There is no Masonic God. A Freemason who prays to the Great Architect of the Universe knows that his own belief will translate and direct that prayer to the God he worships. Prayer alone does not make a religion.

In understanding the relationship between religion and Freemasonry, we must understand what we mean by religion. One definition of religion is “a system of faith in and worship of a Divine Being.” There are obligations in religion, which are different from those of Freemasonry. These broader obligations are set by religious leaders for their congregations: Their aim is to “impart knowledge of God and faith in his revealed will.”

Freemasonry as defined in our ritual is very different from the obligations required of a religion. We learn in the First Degree Charge that “Freemasonry is an institution having for its foundation the practice of the social and moral virtues.” The emphasis on morality is obvious, but so is the lack of a required system of worship.

The relationship between Masonry and God and Masonry and Religion is clearly laid out several times in Masonic ritual. For example, in the First Degree Master’s Lecture, we are admonished to have faith in God, hope of

immortality, and charity for all mankind. We are charged to regard the Volume of the Sacred Law as the great light in our profession and are told that in the Bible we will learn the duties we owe to God. In describing those duties, the Masonic ritual does not prescribe a formal system of worship. In the Second Degree, we are taught that through Speculative Masonry the contemplative Mason views with reverence and admiration the glorious works of the Creation. But the ritual never requires the candidate to conform to a specific dogma.

The Brotherhood of Man is a fundamental tenet of Freemasonry. All the great religions of the world teach the Brotherhood of Man as a basic tenet of faith, but the BASIS upon which they set it forth differs for each religion and for Masonry.

Buddhism, for example, bases the doctrine of Brotherhood on the belief that all men are so entangled in the sufferings of life that they must be Brothers out of sympathy—a Brotherhood of Understanding. Confucianism based the doctrine of Brotherhood on the sense of common task in developing mankind—a Brotherhood of Service. Christianity bases the truth of Brotherhood on the truth of the Fatherhood of God.

There is a deep and beautiful truth in each of these religions. Masonry has attempted to picture the truth of the Brotherhood of Man by using a system of symbols and allegory that can unite men of every country, sect, and opinion in fellowship and love. In doing this, Freemasonry is an example to

others of what can be accomplished when men and women put aside what might divide them in favor of what unites them in achieving a greater good.

James Anderson wrote the first Masonic Book of Constitutions, published in 1723, not long after the founding of the Grand Lodge of England in 1717. His first principle on the relation of religion and Freemasonry illustrated a change of attitude from previous years:

“A Mason is obliged by his Tenure to observe the Moral Law...and if he rightly understands the Craft, he will never be a Stupid Atheist, nor an irreligious Libertine, nor act against conscience. In ancient Times the Christian Masons were charged to comply with the Christian usages of each country where they traveled or worked. But Masonry being found in all Nations, even of diverse Religions, they are now only charged to adhere to that Religion in which all men agree (leaving each Brother to his own particular opinions); that is, to be Good Men and True, Men of Honour and Honesty, by whatever Names, Religions, or Persuasions they may be distinguished.”

Freemasonry teaches morality—it encourages men to try to be better, to discipline themselves, and to consider their relations with others. Religions also encourage morality, but they refer questions of morality and ethics to God. Freemasonry deals with morality at the ground level; religion takes it upwards.

Masonry does not seek to reform men. It seeks to bind better men, those who are already good and true, in closer bonds of fellowship and love, and to perfect the work already begun in making those better men into good men. The ancient Greeks taught that the goal of life was to achieve the Good—to live the good life, to be good men. To be a good man was to be what a man is supposed to be and how he should live his daily life. The ancient Greek philosophers had many answers for what it means to be a good man.

Freemasonry is our modern answer to this question. Freemasonry teaches that to be good men we must first believe in a Supreme Being, for if there is no God then all things are permitted. Freemasonry teaches men to be honest and honorable in dealing with other men and women, and not to act against what they *know* in their hearts and minds to be the right thing to do. We obligate ourselves not to cheat or defraud another person in our business dealings. Because all men are our brothers and members of the human family, we know that we can trust each other with our innermost secrets and to keep them in confidence. We are taught to sympathize with the misfortunes of others, to listen with a friendly ear to the hearts of the unhappy, and restore peace to the troubled minds of our families and friends. And these are but a few of ways in which Freemasonry works to make better men good, and good men even better.

Religion is a man's personal guide to living the good and moral life for himself and his family. Freemasonry brings together men of all religions

with those who simply believe in a Supreme Being, to work with harmony to improve our local communities, our state and our nation. The tenets of Freemasonry reinforce and support the Divine and Moral Laws taught in our churches and synagogues. Freemasonry is our modern working tool for each of us to apply the principles of brotherly love, relief and truth to solving the problems that face us in today's world—public education, homelessness, ethics in government, and the list goes on.

United in Freemasonry, men who might otherwise have remained at a perpetual distance are enabled to work to change the world.