

THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN FREEMASONRY

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"LET NO MAN enter upon any great or important undertaking without first invoking the aid of Deity!" At the threshold of one's Masonic career one is thus admonished - surely this appeal to the value and efficacy of prayer by a distinguished Masonic authority has both virtue and validity. It indicates primarily that the Craft is grounded upon that natural religion, the religion of all good men and true, the religion which is and should be a part of every man's nature, of which prayer is the appropriate tangible expression.

"My boy," I once heard a father address his son, "you make me rejoice by your wish and desire to become a Mason. I have been a member of the Craft now upwards of thirty years and, in all this long time, I believe rightly, have indulged great pride in my affiliation with the Fraternity. Its teachings are sublime; to follow its lessons in the daily tasks of life makes me a better man - at least, I hope I am a better man because I am a Mason. For, Freemasonry is my religion. It is a religion; isn't it?"

"Are you asking me this question? If you are, I am not loath to answer it according to my lights," I countered. "Well," the father rejoined, "don't you look upon Freemasonry, your Masonry, my Masonry, the Masonry of us all, as a religion?"

"Frankly, I do not," I replied. "Freemasonry is not a sect in religion; it is a support of and an aid to all religions. Under certain of its aspects I shall allow that Freemasonry is a surrogate for the forms of religion, if you will. But it is no more than this."

From the foregoing colloquy, which actually occurred, this paper derives. For I hold that it is essential and useful for the benefit of the Craft to define, and to limit, the place of religion in Freemasonry, to explain the religious aspects of the work of the Craft, and to set forth in how far and to what extent religion, dogmatic and revealed, is a part of Freemasonry. Essential as well as useful, for the sake of the average member of the Fraternity who, like the father in the cited conversation, confuses that natural religion, the religion of all good men and true, that which is emphatically the centre of the Masonic system of morality and teaching, with dogmatic or sectarian religion.

At this point it will be well to refer to the Preamble to the Book of Constitutions of the Grand Lodge of New York, embracing as this does a lucid explanation of the Masonic belief and the Masonic teaching. This Preamble is an inspiration to every Mason in New York and elsewhere, for it represents the quintessence of deep and fertile reflection upon the eternal Masonic verities.

THE FREE and Accepted Masons of the State of New York, by their Grand Officers and Representatives in Grand Lodge assembled, at an Annual Communication thereof, in accordance with existing Constitutions and Laws, do establish and promulgate the following Preamble and Constitution:

"PREAMBLE

"As an expression of the simplest form of the faith of Masonry, not exhaustive, but incontrovertible and suggestive, the following is

"THE MASONIC BELIEF

- There is one God, the Father of all men.
- The Holy Bible is the Great Light in Masonry, and the Rule and Guide for faith and practice.
- Man is immortal.
- Character determines destiny.
- Love of man is, next to love of God, man's first duty. Prayer, communion of man with God, is helpful.

"Recognizing the impossibility of confining the teaching of Masonry to any fixed forms of expression, yet acknowledging the value of authoritative statements of fundamental principles, the following is proclaimed as

"THE MASONIC TEACHING

"Masonry teaches man to practice charity and benevolence, to protect chastity, to respect the ties of blood and friendship, to adopt the principles and revere the ordinances of religion, to assist the feeble, guide the blind, raise-up the downtrodden, shelter the orphan, guard the altar, support the Government, inculcate morality, promote learning, love man, fear God, implore His mercy and hope for happiness."

IF IN THE LIGHT of the language of this Preamble, it is remarked that Freemasonry, like the Church, rests on certain great and perennially valid dogmas - for example, "there is one God, the Father of all men"; or, "love of man is, next to love of God, man's first duty" - the answer to this remark is that these dogmas, for such they are, constitute the web and woof of that universal religion or belief, without which our world of men could not possibly continue in harmony with the greater World controlled and dominated by the Supreme Architect of the Universe.

To understand the extent of the place of religion in our Freemasonry today it is necessary that we compendiously recite such facts of Masonic history as are applicable to this theme. When Freemasonry, in the first half of the eighteenth century and on the hospitable soil of Great Britain, the motherland of the Craft, successfully was universalized, the leaders who took this courageous step, whereby the Fraternity became useful and effective as an organization within the confines of which all men acknowledging the dominance of God in His world could find a proper place, crystallized the thought which produced this act of theirs in the first of the "Charges of a Free Mason," that "concerning God and Religion." This reads as follows:

"A *Mason* is obliged by his Tenure, to obey the moral Law; and if he rightly understands the Art, he will never be a stupid *Atheist*, nor an irreligious *Libertine*. But though in ancient Times Masons were charged in every Country to be of the Religion of that Country or Nation, whatever it was, yet 'tis now thought more expedient only leaving their particular opinions to themselves; that is, to be *good Men and true*, or men of Honor and Honesty, by whatever Denominations or Persuasions they may be distinguished; whereby Masonry becomes the *centre of Union*, and the means of conciliating true Friendship among Persons that must have remained at a perpetual distance."

(From Constitution of the Grand Lodge of New York)

This quotation, succinctly setting forth the law and the historical foundations of the place of religion in Freemasonry, is the pertinent text and fundament of our remarks. In other words, we have here the law which defines and limits the place of religion in Freemasonry; all the rest of our remarks are but the commentary thereon.

Before the Craft was thus universalized, especially in the times when its Operative side was preponderant, Freemasonry depended for its vitality upon its intimate connection with the Established Church. Then it was, indeed, a confraternity of workmen only within and for the advantage of the Established Church. When the Operative side of the Craft was completely engulfed in the Speculative, Freemasons ceased to be ecclesiastical workmen. If then their ideals had not been successfully universalized, and made the heritage of men of every race and condition, we should have beheld a Craft without a real right to be, bound to one Church but accomplishing nothing positive for its glory.

According to the Old Charge, religion is, of course, the basis of Freemasonry, for, without it, there would be no Freemasonry as we have and value it. Religion, whatever its form is, makes for morality, right living, for the

exemplification in daily practice of all that which its principles set forth in precept. In the natural religion, which is the foundation of our Craft, the Masonic belief and the Masonic teaching constitute an elementary system of morality and are thus a support of and an aid to all religions. If religion had no place whatever in the Craft we should and could not hold, as we now rightly do, that "there is one God; the Father of all men" and, equally and as a necessary corollary, that men living under the Fatherhood of the one God are brethren all. These two cardinal principles, it should be added, are fundamental to all civilized creeds and are thus essentially a part of the natural religion which is the basic ideal of our Craft.

NATURAL RELIGION with its universalistic appeal is importantly differentiated from dogmatic religion in that the former is and intends to be a system of ethical teaching of morality, applicable and acceptable to all men regardless of their origins or their cherished and traditional faiths, whilst the latter, building necessarily upon an underlying foundation of natural religion, erects upon this a superstructure of particular dogmas or articles of faith. These dogmas or articles of faith, constituting a creed, are based upon the special historical factors peculiar to the faith in question or upon certain events in its history or upon movements within its economy.

Were Freemasonry to hold a place for sectarian, revealed and dogmatic religion of any particular form within its economy today, as it undoubtedly did in the days before the speculative and universalistic sides of the Craft became predominant, and as regrettably it still does in certain lands on the continents of Europe where the true significance of our British and American Freemasonry is not appreciated, then the Craft would represent but another exercise of man's religious instinct in the shape of a particular sect or of a specific dogmatic, sectarian and revealed faith. Certainly this is the case wherever the facts of racial superiority and of the restriction in the choice of candidates for Masonic light to such as conform by blood, descent or outward profession of faith to a particular form, are deemed controlling. British and American Freemasonry has ever continued in complete accord with the requirements laid down in the Old Charge, already cited.

In the lands where Freemasonry is, in fact, simply and solely an additional vehicle for a special theological establishment; it, merely provides a particular form of religion (in this sectarian expression thereof) with a novel liturgy and ritual. What, then, to such Freemasons, becomes of the Old Charge, with its proper insistence on the religion of all good men and true? What, then, in their case, happens to our undying Masonic ideal that all men, regardless of how they acknowledge God and worship Him in their several liturgies and historic rituals, meet together on the common platform of brotherly love and stress the bonds of common union? Such so-called Freemasons have no real

religion in their Freemasonry, and their Masonic ideals are repressed beyond recall by the causes of difference between them and other Masons. To them our ritual and liturgy are the be-all and end-all of Masonic endeavor. In their case this leads to ludicrous results and robs the Craft of its power for general human uplift.

NO! FREEMASONRY by its tenure must be, and remains so for all time, hospitable to the great and immutable ethical teachings of that natural religion, the principles of which underlie all civilized religions. It must allow for the basic elements common to all the historic faiths of civilized men. It must adopt the attitude of mind of the poet, when he simply but sublimely sang:

Flower in the crannied wall;
I pluck you out of the crannies,
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
Little flower - but if I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is.

Here Freemasonry must stand also with Alexander Pope who, in An Essay on Man, said:

For modes of faith let graceless zealots fight;
His can't be wrong whose life is in the right.
In Faith and Hope the world will disagree,
But all mankind's concern is Charity:
All must be false that thwart this one great end,
And all of God that bless mankind or mend.

These great poets, to judge from their words, rightly sensed the deep, religious import of life. They must have beheld God everywhere; to them the religion of all good men and true must have been a vivifying force. These are, in truth, our Masonic ideals. Tennyson was not a Craftsman, yet he, as well as Pope the Mason, glimpsed and fully understood the Masonic ideals of belief and conduct. For, with its teachings as to recognizing God's providence and living life in the right, Freemasonry is patently religious. Its religious character, however, is deeply universalistic; of particular creeds, and of the special dogmas which inhere to these, Freemasonry, once more we quickly add, can never know aught.

Not for one moment must it be thought, on the other hand, that Freemasonry desires to substitute the universalistic religious nature of its teaching for the articles of faith which each of its adherents possesses or should possess by birth, tradition or conviction. The contrary is, indeed, the case! Freemasonry in the dogmatic religious aspect of its polity leaves each of its adherents

exactly where it finds him, the content of his religious consciousness, however, appreciably deepened and intensified by his contact with Masonic work.

Moreover, the Craft has no quarrel with the professors of any particular form of religion although, unfortunately, the converse of this proposition is not equally true. Freemasonry by the very nature of its teaching, as has been pointed out, is and must be hospitable to the ideals of every civilized creed, for all men who believe in God and accept the Bible as embodying and preserving the code of His laws must acknowledge that God is the Father of all men and that, consequently, all men are brethren. In this respect, then, it is obvious that Freemasonry is a support of and an aid to all dogmatic religions. In the acceptance of these principles by Freemasons, and their carrying them out into practice, the Craft fulfills its mission in the world in ample measure.

Again, by insisting upon the naturally religious character of its teachings Freemasonry performs; indeed, a useful service. From its sacred Altar the Christian returns to his Church, the Jew to his Synagogue, and the Mohammedan to his Mosque, the better equipped for their several personal religious duties and obligations because they are now panoplied with that strength which follows from fellowship with one another in the common service and cause of holiness to the Lord.

NOT IDLY has the Grand Lodge of New York placed the motto "Holiness to the Lord," high on its escutcheon. The work performed in the various Lodges acknowledging the sovereign authority of this Grand Lodge is calculated, if rightly executed, because it is rightly conceived, to make for true holiness to the Lord on the part of all those engaged in it. The real Freemason is consecrated by his tenure to all that which is, fundamentally just and true and right in life; he aims to live right, to think high.

This appropriate consecration may be viewed under two aspects. In the first place, it ennobles the significance of Masonic work. "Unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it!" God, the solid foundation of the ethical teachings of Freemasonry, gives an essential validity to them. The Supreme Architect of the Universe as our Ruler and Guide stands as the basis of all serious Masonic endeavor. Thus the Craft is an important force for righteousness. Not only within the confines of the Lodge, but also in the community as well as in the state at large. The natural religious fundament of the structure reared and maintained by the Craft is plainly visible to all. who have eyes to see; so the men of the Masonic Fraternity are and properly must be accounted active agents in the development of the transcendent ideal of God and country throughout every portion of our citizenry.

Secondly; this insistence, on the naturally, religious consecration of Freemasons results advantageously in their case, as Freemasons and as citizens of the state. Freemasons take with them from their sacred altar the great and irrefragable lessons of the Masonic belief and the Masonic teaching. If they practice these lessons assiduously they are enabled to be better citizens and better Freemasons. They, in consequence, appreciate to an even greater degree, because they now fully comprehend, the appeal of the Church that its followers pray and labor for the complete realization of God's Universal Kingdom on this earth. For they now know that Freemasonry through its belief and its teaching seeks to bring about this realization, in common with and as an aid to and support of the Church. The Craft thus reflects God's Fatherhood in its world - encompassing union of all men into the one brotherhood.

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