

Conscience and the Craft

Question on Religion and Freemasonry

Expanded Edition

by

Jim Tresner, Ph.D., 33rd degree,

Forward

by

MW Allan Large,

Grand Master of Masons of the State of Oklahoma

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Few things are sadder in human affairs than unnecessary conflict, caused by misunderstanding or the unwillingness of men and women to discuss, calmly and factually, the differences they perceive to separate them. In recent years, Freemasons have felt especially victimized by this problem. Some people make themselves adversaries of Masonry without first finding out if a conflict really exists. Often, rather than asking a knowledgeable Mason for clarification or information, they simply read books written by other anti-Masons and find their answers there. I have asked Dr. Tresner to write this pamphlet because I know that most conflicts people see with Masonry -- especially in the area of religion -- are the result of misunderstanding rather than actual differences.

Each man seeks in Masonry for himself, and each man finds for himself. Each man has an absolute right to interpret Masonry for himself as he sees fit. With our long tradition of prizing intellectual liberty and individual thought, it could not be otherwise.

But if no interpretation of Masonry is officially "right," there are some which are clearly wrong. When someone ascribes words to a person which that person never wrote, or when someone insists that Masons believe something which has never been a part of the lessons of Masonry, it is the duty of every thinking Mason to say, "That is not what Masonry teaches!"

It is my prayer that every thoughtful Christian who wants to know more about Freemasonry will read this information and review again in his heart the lessons of Him who taught it is better to love than to hate and fear, and that it is our duty to cherish all mankind, to strive to be better tomorrow than we were yesterday, and to strive to emulate the compassion and caring of the Good Shepherd.

Allan D. Large

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I undertake this task with considerable diffidence. Indeed, was it not for a belief that it is sinful to be silent when misunderstandings create pain and confusion, I would probably decline. The world of Masonry is vast, complex and rich, but it is as nothing compared to the immense sweep and scope of thought, faith, history and culture contained in the word Christianity.

As a professed and professing member of the Christian (Disciples of Christ) Church, I have never found any conflict between the lodge room and the sanctuary. And indeed as the Reverend Doctor Norman Vincent Peale, one of the best known Christian and Masonic authors of today has remarked, there can never be conflict between Christianity and any other organization which constantly urges its members to live a moral life.

Following are some questions often asked by those who are not members of Masonry. The responsibility for the answers is my own, although, I have tried to draw from the best known and most respected Masonic writers.

Is Masonry a religion?

No, not by the definitions most people use. Religion, as the term is commonly used, implies several things: a plan for salvation or path by which one reaches the after-life; a theology which attempts to describe the nature of God; and the description of ways or practices by which a man or woman may seek to communicate with God.

Masonry does none of those things. We offer no plan of salvation. With the exception of saying that He is a loving Father who desires only good for His children, we make no effort to describe the nature of God. And while we open and close our meetings with prayer, and we teach that no man should ever begin any important undertaking without first seeking the guidance of God, we never tell a man how he should pray or for what he should pray.

Instead, we tell him that he must find the answers to these great questions in his own faith, in his church or synagogue or other house of worship. We urge men not to neglect their spiritual development and to be faithful in the practice of their religion. As the Grand Lodge of England wrote in "Freemasonry and Religion", "Freemasonry is far from indifferent to religion. Without

interfering in religious practice, it expects each member to follow his own faith, and to place above all other duties his duty to God by whatever name He is known." Masonry itself makes only a simple religious demand on a man--he must believe that he has an immortal soul and he must believe in God. No atheist can be a Mason.

Why are Masonic buildings called "Temples", doesn't that suggest a religious building?

Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary provides a definition for the word "temple" which is as good an explanation as any: "a building, usually of imposing size, serving the public or an organization in some special way; as, a temple of art, a Masonic temple"

Have some Masonic writers said that Masonry is a religion?

Yes, and again, it's a matter of definition. If, as some writers have, you define religion as "man's urge to venerate the beautiful, serve the good and see God in everything," you can say that Masonry subscribes to a religion. But that, surely, is not in conflict with Christianity or any other faith.

Is Freemasonry a Mystery Religion?

No.

The relationship (if any) between Freemasonry and the ancient Mysteries is a favorite topic of speculation among Masonic writers. Unfortunately, just as Mathematicians tend to write for other Mathematicians and Historians tend to write for other Historians, Masonic writers tend to write for other Masonic writers. Many things are never explained, simply because it is assumed the reader already knows them.

Many Masonic writers say that Freemasonry uses the tradition of the Mysteries. (Others, meaning the same thing, say that Masonry is the successor to the Mysteries.) By that, we simply mean that Masonry also seeks to find men and help them develop in thought and understanding to seek enlightenment. The principles of goodness (not to be confused with the principles of salvation) compassion, concern, love, trustworthiness, integrity, a sense or "connectedness" with history-- these are the elements of the Mysteries, along with other schools of thought, preserved by Freemasonry. And they are not in conflict with any faith.

Masonry has nothing to do with the religion taught in the Mysteries. Rather, we are concerned with the ethics and morality taught there-- ethics and morality which have been ratified by Christianity and every major religion or mankind.

Can a man be a Christian and a Mason at the same time?

Perhaps the best answer is that most of us are, at least in the United States. The ranks of Masonry have been and are distinguished by many of the outstanding religious leaders of America. A quick scan through out the book "10,000 Famous Freemasons", gives us these names from history, among many others.

- Rev. Charles T. Aikens, who served as President of the Lutheran Synod of Eastern Pennsylvania.
- Bishop James Freeman, the Episcopal Bishop of Washington D.C., who first conceived and began the construction of the National Cathedral.
- Bishop William F. Anderson, one of the most important leaders of the Methodist Church.
- Rev. Lansing Burrows, Civil War Hero and Secretary of the Southern Baptist Convention.
- Rev. James C. Baker, who created the Wesley Foundation
- William R. White, 33rd degree, who served as President of Baylor, and secretary of the Sunday School Board, Southern Baptist Convention.
- Rev. Hugh I. Evans, who served as national head of the Presbyterian Church

It is useful on this question, to let some of America's most honored Clergy speak for themselves.

Carl J. Sanders, Bishop of the United Methodist Church and holder of the highest honor conferred by the Scottish Rite of Freemasonry, writes: "My Masonic activities have never interfered with my loyalty to and my love for my Church. Quite to the contrary, my loyalty to my Church has been strengthened by my Masonic ties. Good Masons are good Churchmen."

Dr. James P. Wesberry, Executive Director and Editor of the Baptist publication "Sunday" writes: "It is no secret that Masons love and revere the Bible nor is it a secret that Masonry helped to preserve it in the darkest age of the Church when infidelity sought to destroy it. The Bible meets Masons with its sacred message at every step of progress in its various degrees."

The Reverend Louis Gant, 33rd degree, Mason and District Superintendant of the Methodist Church writes: "Let no one say you cannot be a Christian and a Mason at the same time. I know too many who are both and proud to be both."

But we are proud, as Masons, that members of all faiths have found value in the fraternity. Rabbi Seymour Atlas, 32nd degree, and holder of some of the highest Masonic honors, writes of what he finds in Masonry: "I was brought up in a religious home, a son of a Rabbi with seven generations of Rabbis preceding me... I am proud to be a Mason who believes in the dignity of God's children and opposes hatred and bigotry, and stands for truth, justice, kindness, integrity and righteousness for all."

Is Masonry Anti-Christian?

No, Masonry is not anti ANY religion. This charge is raised by some anti-Masonic writers. Quoting Matthew 12:30 ("He that is not with me, is against me; and he that gathereth not with me, scattereth abroad."), they claim that, since Masonry does not require its members to be Christian, we are actively anti-Christian.

First of all, of course, a reading of the entire passage makes it quite clear that Jesus was answering the Pharisees who were criticizing Him; it is not a passage which relates to the present discussion at all. Most people wouldn't agree that there are only two positions in the world-- Christian and anti-Christian. The government of the United States, the city library, even the natural gas company, all serve and employ Christians and non-Christians alike-- but no

reasonable person would say they were, therefore "anti-Christian." Masons encourage their members in their individual faiths, we do not oppose any faith.

Does Masonry have a hidden religious agenda or practice, known only to "higher" Masons?

No, The religious position of Freemasonry is stated often and openly, and we've already mentioned it above. A Mason must believe in God, and he is actively encouraged to practice his individual faith. Masonry has no "god" of its own. Some anti-Masons have said that we are not allowed to mention the name of God in Lodge. That isn't true-- in fact that is one of the two meanings of the "G" in the square and compasses logo (the other meaning is "geometry"). It is true that we generally use some other term, "Grand Architect of the Universe" is most common, to refer to God. That is done only to avoid giving religious offense to anyone whose faith refers to God by another name. But the God to whom Masons pray is the God to whom all Christians pray.

But haven't some Masonic writers said that the information given in the early Masonic degrees is incomplete or even misleading?

Again, it's a matter of Masonic writers writing for those they assume have a background knowledge. Another way we say the same thing is "Masonry is a progressive science, revealed by degrees." There's nothing astonishing, and certainly nothing sinister in that. ALL knowledge is gained bit by bit, and this is especially true in ethics and morality. A minister, who gave a new member of the church a copy of the works of, for example, Cyprian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, and said "When you've mastered those, let me know," would do very little good. Instead, Masonry introduces the idea of ethics and morality, and gives some practical instruction in each. But then it says to the Mason, "We teach by symbols because symbols can be constantly explored. Think about these things, read what others have written. Only in that way can you make the knowledge and insight really your own." Masonry tries very hard to raise questions, and to help its members acquire the tools for thought-- but we do not try to give answers.

Why is it so hard to find an official statement of Masonic dogma?

Because there isn't such a thing. We've already mentioned everything Masonry has to say officially on the topic. To go further, as an official position would deny a man his right to think for himself and his right to follow the dictates of his own faith. Each Mason has a right to seek Masonry for what he wants to find. It is his right to believe as he wishes; BUT it is not his right to force that belief on others.

But isn't the Masonic scholar Albert Pike's major book entitled "Morals and Dogma"?

Yes. As is clear from his writings, however, Pike using the word in its original Greek sense of "that which I think is true." or "that which has been thought to be true," not in the modern sense of "this is what you are required to believe."

And the question of "Morals and Dogma" brings up an important point. Anti-Masonic writers are forever "discovering" something they find shocking in the book, largely because they don't

understand what kind of book it is. Pike was attempting the almost impossible task of surveying and condensing the whole history of human thought in philosophy into one volume. He writes about things which were believed in ancient Egypt, China, Persia-- all over the world. It's easy to take a paragraph out of context-- as one writer does with Pike's comment about the ancient Egyptian belief in Osiris-- and then insist that Masons teach and believe that all good comes from Osiris. But a history lesson is not a statement of theology.

Some of the anti-Masonic writers seem almost to deliberately twist things to make them say what they want. As an example, the same writer, takes a passage in which Pike in contrasting the immortality of the soul with the temporary nature of earthly things. To illustrate the impermanence of the body as opposed to the soul, Pike notes that, when we die, our bodies resolve again into the earth. The minerals of which it was composed may scatter far. Those minerals may be picked up again by the roots of plants, grow into food, and be eaten by other men. This, the anti-Masonic writer suggests, is pagan Masonic communion-- eating the dead! A simple illustration is distorted into a cannibal feast.

Which Masonic writer does Masonry consider authoritative?

None, if you mean "authoritative" in the sense that they speak for the fraternity or that what they say is "binding" upon Masons. Each Mason must think for himself, and each is entitled to write whatever he wishes.

It's like the situation is studying government. If a person really wants to understand American Government, he or she almost has to read Madison's and Hamilton's "Federalist Papers" as well as de Tocqueville and the History of the Constitutional Convention. But none of those things are the law-- they are just commentaries on the way the law was made, and the thinking of the people who wrote the Constitution.

It's like that with Masonic writers. Some have a lot of value to say-- some are useless (each man can write whatever he wants, after all) -- but none of them "speaks" for Masonry. He can only speak for himself.

Is there such a thing as a Masonic Bible?

No. The Bibles sometimes called "Masonic Bibles" are just Bibles (usually the King James Version) to which a concordance, giving the Biblical citations on which the Masonic Ritual is based, has been added. Sometimes reference material on Masonic history is included. Anyone is welcome to read one.

Is Freemasonry a secret society?

No. A secret society tries to hide the fact that it exists. Masonic Lodges are marked with signs, listed in the phone book and their meeting places and times are usually listed in the newspaper. Members identify themselves with pins and rings. The only secret in Masonry relate to the ways we can recognize each other. The ritual of Masonry, the Monitor, is in print and anyone can read it. Interestingly, the anti-Masonic writers who condemn us for being a secret society are always quoting from the Monitor. If it's a secret, it isn't a very well-kept one.

So what do Masons mean by "Secrecy?" What kind of secrecy do we teach?

The first and most important kind is the ability to keep confidences. All of us value those friends whom we can talk, "blow off steam," really open ourselves to, and still know without any question that the friend will never tell anyone else or use those moments of sometimes painful honesty against us in any way. As it says in Proverbs 11, 13 "a talebearer revealeth secrets, but he that is of a faithful spirit concealeth the matter." Masons are taught it's important to be such a friend.

The second kind of secrecy we teach is the idea of "doing good in silence." One of the degrees says it this way: "Be careful that you do not contribute to showy charities in order to have the reputation of being a charitable man, while sending away from your door the Poor whom God has sent to test you."

Secrecy, in those senses, is a virtue, and it is in those senses it is taught in Masonry.

Can a Christian take the vows or obligations of a Mason?

Yes, with the exception of a very few denominations. If a Christian belongs to a denomination which forbids all vows, such as the Oath of Office of the President of the United States or the common oath of the law courts, "I solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God," then he probably could not take the obligation. Any Christian, whose denomination does not forbid the Presidential or the court oath, or the oath taken when entering the Armed Services could take the Masonic obligation. Some anti-Masonic writers have complained about the so-called "penalties" in the Masonic obligations. Those penalties are purely symbolic and refer to the pain, despair and horror which which any honest man should feel at the thought that he had violated his sworn word.

Does Masonry use symbols which are diabolical in nature?

No. Masonry uses many symbols-- it's our primary way of teaching, as it has been the primary way of teaching from ancient times (just try teaching arithmetic without number symbols)-- but there is nothing satanic about them. Symbols mean what the person uses them to mean. X may be a St. Andrew's Cross, ancient symbol of Scotland, or it may mean "multiply two numbers together" (or "10" in Roman Numerals, or "unknown" in algebra, or "don't do this," or "truce," or "Xenon" in chemistry, or "by" as in 2 x 4 board, or "this is the spot," or even "railroad crossing"). It depends on the meaning in the mind of the person using it.

It's the same for Masonic symbols. We sometimes use the five-pointed star, for example. Some people chose to see that as a symbol of witchcraft. It's their right to use it that way in their own thinking if they wish. But we use it as a symbol of man, because that is its oldest meaning (the five points refer to the head, the hands and the feet). The five-pointed star, with one point downward, is used by the Order of the Eastern Star. Some anti-Masons like to see it as a symbol of the devil. But it's also known as the "Star of the Incarceration," with the downward-pointing ray representing that moment when God came down from Heaven and was Incarnate by the Holy Ghost. And it is in that meaning it is used by the Eastern Star ("We have seen His star in the East, and are coming to worship him").

But don't some writers say that in the 30th degree of the Scottish Rite the room is filled with diabolical symbols and the candidate comes face to face with Lucifer?

Some anti-Masonic writers have said that, but it isn't true. First of all, they mistake a stage-set for a sanctuary. The Degrees of Masonry are plays, some set in the Lodge room and some using full stage settings. The message of the 30th degree is that man should think about death, (not avoid the thought fearfully), and realize that death is not frightening but a natural process. So the setting contains traditional symbols of death, like black curtains and the drawing of a mausoleum.

But the material which these writers quote as coming from the 30th degree doesn't. They generally quote from the anti-Masonic book "Scottish Rite Masonry Illuminated". The anonymous author of the book wildly changed materials wherever he wished-- even some of the names of the degrees are wrong.

Although the book is presented as a ritual of the fraternity, you need only read through his introductory notes or end notes to realize that he intends it as an attack of Freemasonry, which he calls "a tissue of fearful falsehood."

The book is generally quoted by writers who insist that, instead of quoting anti-Masonic materials, they are using only material, written by and/or published by Masons for Masons." Perhaps they have not read the notes.

Is Masonry "guilty" of teaching toleration?

And proud of it! It seems a strange accusation, but anti-Masonic writers often charge that we accept people with many different religious viewpoints as Brothers. They are correct. Jesus did not say to us, "A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another-- as long as he goes to the same church you do, or belongs to the same political party." Yet one anti-Masonic writer claims that this toleration is the blackest sin of Masonry. Toleration, he says, "springs from pits of hell and from the father of lies, Lucifer." When you consider what intolerance has produced in the world-- the Inquisition, the burning of Protestants at the stake, the horrors of Hitler, the mass murders of Stalin, the "killing fields" of Cambodia, the massacre of the inhabitants of Jerusalem by the Crusaders-- it is hard to believe that toleration springs from the devil.

Does Freemasonry teach that man can be saved by good works?

That charge is sometimes leveled against us by anti-Masons who mistake both the nature of Masonry and the meanings of its ritual. Salvation is not a grace which Masonry can or does offer. As the Reverend Christopher Haffner points out in his book, "Workman Unashamed: The Testimony of a Christian Freemason", "Within their Lodges, Freemasons are not concerned with salvation and conversion, but with taking men as they are and pointing them in the direction of brotherhood and moral improvement. Insofar as the Order is successful in this aim, it is content, and leaves the member to devote himself to his own religious faith to receive the grace of salvation."

In most Masonic rituals, the candidate is reminded of that even before he steps into the Lodge room for the first time. A typical example reads: "You are aware that whatever a man may have gained here on earth, whether of titles, wealth, honors, or even his own merit, can never serve him as passport to heaven; but previous to his gaining admission there he must become poor and destitute, blind and naked, dependent upon the sovereign Will of God; he must be divested of the rags of his own righteousness, and be clothed in a garment furnished him from on high.

Is a Masonic service a worship service?

No. Except, perhaps, in the sense that, for a Christian, EVERY act is an act of worship. Our meetings open and close with prayer, Masons are encouraged to remember that God sees and knows everything that we do, and the Bible is always open during a Masonic meeting. But it is a meeting of a fraternity, not a worship service.

And that brings up one of the most ridiculous charges sometimes made against us-- that our members are "really" worshipping a demon or some pagan god such as the Baalim, Bel, Osiris, Mendes, Pan, etc. -- only they don't know it! But you cannot worship something with out knowing it. The act of worship is an act of full concentration, knowledge, and devotion-- "with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind." We honor and venerate GOD, not the Adversary.

One example will serve to show the complete lack of foundation of these kinds of charges. The charge of worshipping a demon usually involves one named "Baphomet." Historians know the origin of the story.

In brief, during the middle ages, a military monastic order known as the Knights Templar grew very wealthy. King Philip the Fair of France and the Pope, wanting to confiscate their treasure, had them thrown into prison and accused of heresy (the only charge that would allow for the confiscation of the property) in 1307. Philip, fearing that the Inquisition would be too gentle (!) had his own commissioners involved. After years or horrible torture, some of the knights signed confessions-- of anything their torturers wanted.

They were burned at the stake.

A standard part of the pre-written confessions was worshipping an idol named Baphomet (language scholars tell us that "Baphomet" was a term for "Mohammed" in the Middle Ages). You can read the full story in any good historical account of the period.

So, "Baphomet" wasn't the name of a demon, the Knights Templar did not worship him/it, their "confessions" were obtained under torture and, at any rate, a false charge used to steal from and murder military monks in A.D. 1307 has nothing to do with Freemasonry.

Did Albert Pike really say that all Masons were secret followers of Lucifer?

No. In many anti-Masonic books you'll see what is supposed to be a quotation from Pike, saying that all Masons of the "Higher Degrees" are secret worshipers of Lucifer or that we regard Lucifer as God. The historical fact is that those words were written in 1894, three years after Pike's death. They were written by a notorious atheist and pornographer named Gabriel Jogand-

Pages, but better known by his pen name, Leo Taxil. Taxil was engaged in an elaborate hoax to discredit both Freemasonry and the Church of Rome, and made up the Pike quotation out of thin air. He then "discovered" the letters, and revealed them to the world. He was highly praised by the religious authorities-- showered with honors and listed as a defender of the faith for having revealed the "true evil purposes of Masonry."

Then, just as he was being acclaimed all over Europe for his "religious zeal," he publicly announced the hoax, making everyone look like fools. The scandal broke in 1897, but the supposed "Pike letter" had already been published by a man named Abel Clarin de la Rive, who took Taxil's hoax at face value.

Rive's book, "La Femme et l'Efant dans la Franc-Maconnerie Universelle", (Woman and Child in Universal Freemasonry) was quoted by Edith Starr Miller in 1933, in her book, Occult Theocracy. She translated the "quotation" into English.

Since that time, several writers of anti-Masonic books have simply repeated the "quotation" without checking on its source or authenticity. Taxil's public confession and Rive's subsequent retraction of his book notwithstanding, it continues to shadow the name of Pike, who was, to his death, a sincere and devoted Trinitarian Christian.

Can one learn more about Freemasonry without joining the Fraternity?

Yes. The Grand Lodge of almost any state can provide information and lists of books which explain Freemasonry in detail. They are the same books that Freemasons read and study to learn more about the fraternity. And I hope that this short discussion may help resolve some doubts. We have neither horns and tails nor halos. Masons are simply your neighbors, joined together in a fraternity which tries to help men become better people as it tries to help the world become a better place through its charities. It is, so to speak, a "support group" for men who are trying to practice ethics and morality in a world which does not always encourage those ideals.

Freemasonry's teachings are acceptable to all religions-- upholding the values of faith in the secular world-- an organization for thoughtful Christians-- and all men of good will.

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