

The Truth About Freemasonry

by Ian Ellis-Jones

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My aim this morning is to dispel a number of common misconceptions or myths concerning Freemasonry, which is the world's oldest and largest fraternal society.

I must, however, state right at the outset that I am an active member of Freemasonry, having attained the rank of a Master Mason in what is known as the Blue Lodge as well as being a Knight of the Rose Croix of Heredom (18^o in the Scottish Rite). I'm also a lawyer. So, you may think, in light of the foregoing, that all that I'm about to tell you is bunkum ... but it isn't. Anyway, here goes.

MYTH: Freemasonry is a secret society.

FACT: The only "secrets" in Freemasonry are the signs by which Freemasons identify one another and establish their respective degrees of attainment in Masonic knowledge.

A secret society has secret meeting places and may even keep secret its aims and objectives. Its members keep secret their membership of the society. There is nothing "secret" about Freemasonry in any of those senses, whose aims are well-known ("brotherly love, relief and truth"). Although Freemasons have tended to be unnecessarily secretive about their ritual, the only true "secrets" of modern Freemasonry are the ceremonial means of demonstrating that one is a Freemason. These signs (which are "private" to members) are of ancient provenance - medieval stonemasons developed secret signs and passwords as an early form of trade unionism - and have great symbolical value as a symbol of the importance of fidelity and the need to preserve confidences in human relationships. Masons use these so-called "secrets" to test and prove the good character of those who choose to join the fraternity. It's as simple as that.

MYTH: Freemasonry is a religion.

FACT: Freemasonry is *neither* a religion *nor* a religious body.

Freemasonry does not *purport* to be a religion or religious body and does not see itself as a substitute for religion. Indeed, it is *neither* a religion *nor* a religious body, and that has been held to be so by numerous courts of law over the years: see eg *Re Porter* [1925] Ch 746; *United Grand Lodge of Ancient Free & Accepted Masons of England v Holborn Borough Council* [1957] 1 WLR 1080. In the lastmentioned case it was held that the objects of Freemasonry, which pertain to the maintenance and advancement of ethical standards of honesty, integrity, loyalty, compassion, benevolence, temperance, chastity, are not for the advancement of religion. The courts held that although Freemasons are called upon to show reverence for life, Freemasonry in itself is not a religion or a religious body. Further, Freemasonry, which is almost entirely devoid of notions of supernaturalism, fails to satisfy the requirement enunciated by the High Court of Australia in *Church of the New Faith v Commissioner of Pay-roll Tax (Vic)* (1983) 154 CLR 120 that, for there to be a religion, belief in a *supernatural* "Being, Thing or Principle" is for all practical purposes *de rigueur*.

Freemasonry has no creed and does not promote any one religious creed. It has no theological texts, and when a man becomes a Freemason he does not subscribe to a new religion. Each Freemason believes in a God *of his own understanding* and Freemasonry does not ask a candidate to define his concept of God when seeking admission to the fraternity nor does Freemasonry itself make any demands as to how a member thinks of the "Great Architect of the Universe". Further, Freemasonry has no confession of faith, doctrinal statement, dogma or theology, offers no sacraments, and has no holy days. It offers no doctrine or plan of salvation (whether by faith, works, secret knowledge or any other means), does not proselytize, and seeks no converts. Highly naturalistic in orientation, Freemasonry does not profess revelation, but teaches that it is important for every person to have a

religion of their own choice and to be faithful to it in thought, word and deed. It raises no money for religious purposes, and has no seminaries or clergy.

Freemasonry has no sacred literature of its own nor dietary laws, hymnologies or distinctive Masonic prayers like the Lord's Prayer or the Ave Maria. Although the ritual of Freemasonry does have some religious flavour, it involves no form of adoration or worship. Religious discussion, along with discussion of political matters, is not permitted at lodge meetings. It has no symbols that are innately religious in the sense of symbols found in a church or synagogue. Masonic symbols (being working tools in the building trade) are not sacred objects but are related to the development of character and the relationship of one human being with another.

In short, Freemasonry is a non-sectarian fraternity of men of all different religions (including but not limited to both Protestant and Roman Catholic Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists) who meet in fellowship and brotherhood under the Fatherhood of God. As a most ancient ethical society, it is what it purports to be - "a peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory, and illustrated by symbols". Any people, including Freemasons, who treat Freemasonry as being a religion are gravely mistaken.

MYTH: Freemasonry is incompatible with Christianity.

FACT: Freemasonry is not incompatible with any religion.

As has already been mentioned, Freemasonry is not a religion. In addition, as Christopher Knight and Robert Lomas, both Freemasons, point out in their monumental best-seller *The Hiram Key* (1997): "There is no supernatural content to Masonic ritual at all and this is why members of many different religions, including Jews, Christians, Hindus and Buddhists, have found it complementary to, rather than in conflict with, their own theological beliefs." Since Freemasonry is not a religion, the comprehensive name, "God", is used in the ritual of "Craft Masonry" (the first three degrees of Freemasonry, also known as the "Blue Lodge"). On occasions, special titles are accorded to God (eg "The Great Architect of the Universe", "The Grand Geometrician of the

Universe", "the Most High"). The name of Jesus Christ does not appear at all in Craft Masonry, something that some more conservative Christians find offensive. However, although Christianity is Christocentric, it is not Christo-exclusive. Thus, the Christian Mason, when using the name of God within the ritual, is free to understand that to be God in the Person of Jesus Christ.

MYTH: Freemasonry is anti-Catholic.

FACT: Freemasonry does *not* prevent Roman Catholics from becoming Freemasons. It is the Roman Catholic Church that has, at times, prevented its members from becoming Freemasons.

Freemasonry seeks to promote unity and tolerance among all people and does not approve or denounce any religion or religious movement. There are many Catholics who are Freemasons. As regards the Catholic Church's stance towards Freemasonry, although Canon Law *no longer* condemns Masonic membership, my understanding is that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith still *officially* considers that Masonic principles are "irreconcilable" with the doctrine of the Church. However, despite that official teaching, most Catholic bishops throughout the world appear to take the view that, provided the particular Masonic organization is not perceived to be anti-Catholic in any way, there is no reason to prevent practising Catholics from joining.

MYTH: Freemasons worship Lucifer.

FACT: Masonic services do *not* involve worship, and certainly not worship of the Devil.

It is sometimes asserted by opponents of Freemasonry that Freemasonry teaches in its higher degrees (in particular, the 32^o degree) that the Deity is Satan (Lucifer). Neither the attributes nor personification of Lucifer play any role in Masonic beliefs or practices in any of its various degrees and orders. The confusion has unfortunately arisen because some Masonic authors (eg Albert Pike and Albert G Mackey) used the term "luciferian" in its classical or

literary sense to refer to a search for light and knowledge, the very antithesis of evil.

MYTH: Freemasons ride goats at lodge meetings.

FACT: This is hogwash.

This is what happens at Masonic lodge meetings. The meeting opens in accordance with a well-defined ritual in which the persons present identify themselves to be Freemasons by a standard recognizable visible sign. Degree work (ie ceremonies for making and progressing new Masons) take up a fair proportion of the time at lodge meetings, although such work does not happen at every meeting. Degree work involves mini-dramas (similar to old-fashioned morality plays) designed to highlight certain Masonic ethical principles and codes of conduct.

Where there is no degree work, the members are ordinarily given a lecture on an issue of Masonic interest. In addition, there is always a certain amount of administration to attend to (eg confirmation of the minutes of the last meeting, attending to correspondence, balloting for new members, elections of office-bearers, subscriptions, financial expenditures, organizing charitable activities, and so forth). An important ceremony which takes place every year in every Masonic lodge is the Installation of the new Master.

Most Masonic lodges meet monthly. After the completion of the formal part of a lodge meeting the members ordinarily share a meal together, to which members' partners and others are often invited. In addition, most lodges organize regular social activities, many of which include members' partners and families.

MYTH: Freemasonry is sexist, as women are not allowed to become members.

FACT: There is nothing sexist about Freemasonry.

In most (but not all) jurisdictions, Masonry is a *fraternity* - a brotherhood, although in all jurisdictions there are organizations associated with

Freemasonry that have Masonic characteristics and which are exclusively for women. For example, in New South Wales and elsewhere there is “The Order of the Eastern Star” (not to be confused with another organization, which no longer exists, called “The Order of the Star in the East” formerly associated with Krishnamurti that I’ll talk about next month). The Order of the Eastern Star is a Masonic organization designed exclusively for women that seeks to inculcate and promote more-or-less the same ethical values and standards as does the male equivalent. Forget political correctness for the moment. There is *nothing* intrinsically sexist about male bonding and male-only organizations, nor female bonding and female-only organizations. It is important for men to have a few things that they do by themselves, just as it is for women, and that is recognized by feminists themselves ... at least some of them.

MYTH: Washington DC is laid out in the form of the Masonic symbols, the Square, the Compass, the Rule and the Pentagram, and there are Masonic symbols on the United States one dollar bill.

FACT: There is no probative evidence that the city was designed along Masonic lines, and the “All-Seeing Eye” dates back to the Bible, at least.

Much has been made about the so-called “Masonic” street plan of Washington DC. Similar claims have been made about other important cities, including our own Canberra. Like so-called Bible codes and Da Vinci codes, you can find connections and patterns in anything if you look hard enough. Anyone can connect dots and trace lines along streets, between buildings and monuments to create squares, compasses, pentagrams and so forth. Pierre Charles L’Enfant, the French architect and engineer responsible for the original design of Washington DC, is not known to have been a Mason, and what *is* known is that, for the most part, he used Paris in his native France as the model.

The “All-Seeing Eye of God” that appears on the US one dollar bill is not in itself a peculiarly Masonic symbol, although it is referred to in a couple of

places in Masonic ritual. The symbol itself is pre-Masonic and dates back to the Bible, at least, and probably much earlier. In the case of the US one dollar bill, a representation of the symbol appears in conjunction with a representation of an unfinished pyramid. The pyramid is not a Masonic symbol; the ritual, symbolism and teachings of Freemasonry pertain for the most part to the building of King Solomon's Temple, and not pyramids.

MYTH: Freemasons are part of a worldwide conspiracy known as the Illuminati who are intent on world domination.

FACT: This is nothing more than the insane assertions of paranoid conspiracy theorists.

The Illuminati were a secret society in Bavaria in the late 18th century. They had a political agenda pertaining to the abolition of all monarchies, but they met with little success and were destroyed within 15 years of their origin. Some conspiracy theorists believe the Illuminati cabal still exists, involving Jewish banking families, Freemasons and certain others, all of whom are supposedly dedicated to bringing about some form of satanic New World Order. Such an aim is contrary to the aims and objectives of Freemasonry and there is no probative evidence supporting these wild assertions. Indeed, all the evidence is the other way. For example, if Freemasons were intent on world domination, they would organize themselves in a manner designed to bring that about. In fact, there is no "Grand Commander" or other personage responsible for "world Freemasonry" nor is there any single governing body of Freemasonry in the world.

Finally, as regards the assertion that the US dollar bill makes mention of this aim of a "new world order", it needs to be pointed out that the wording on the dollar bill (*novus ordo seclorum*), meaning "a new order of the ages", is a reference to the distinctive form of government enshrined in the US Constitution. If the term were to mean "new world order", the third word would have to be *sæculorum* instead.

Now, how does one become a Mason? As I mentioned earlier, Freemasonry does not proselytize converts. Why? Because the essence of Freemasonry is that a person feels called to share the Freemason's way of life. Indeed, the process of gaining membership of Freemasonry is quite long, and, in itself, is a test of the genuineness and depth of the candidate's desire to become a Mason. You see, the Craft does not want to admit all men into its brotherhood. Freemasonry will admit only those men who are suited to its membership and who understand and fully accept the principles of the Order. In the case of the lodge to which I belong, a person interested in becoming a member is given every assistance and guided step by step through 10 stages towards becoming a member and ultimately a Master Mason.

Most of these 10 steps are self-actuated by the person seeking admission to or advancement in the lodge. Right from the start, it is the prospective member that drives the process towards membership, showing his commitment to the principles of Freemasonry. Each degree in Freemasonry involves a new stage of understanding about the Craft. In the end, the choice is that of the prospective member:

1. The prospective member expresses an interest in finding out more about Freemasonry.
2. He is provided with a clear summary of the principles of Freemasonry and other information about what Freemasonry is and does.
3. The prospective member gets to develop a favourable opinion of the Craft through social contact with members of the lodge.
4. He completes a membership form and delivers it to the secretary of the lodge.
5. He undertakes two brief interviews to ascertain his suitability for membership.
6. Results of the interviews are taken to the lodge members who ballot for his admission.

7. The prospective member is notified of the result of the ballot and, if accepted, he is advised of his date of initiation, which may well take place on the same day as the ballot.
8. At his initiation, the candidate undertakes the First Degree, becoming an Entered Apprentice Freemason.
9. Depending on his readiness, usually in the next 12 months, the new member undertakes the Second Degree, becoming a Fellowcraft Freemason.
10. Some time later, the member progresses to the Third Degree of a Master Mason. He is then able to assist newer members to progress in their learning and understandings. He also has the choice to advance further both in the lodge itself as well as in the Craft.

There's a lot more that I could and would say if I had the time. Perhaps on some other occasion I will speak on the topic of famous Unitarian Freemasons, such as William Howard Taft, the 27th President of the United States of America, and its 10th Chief Justice, and Frederick William Hamilton, Unitarian minister and President of Tufts College.

Here's something I found on an American Masonic website:-

WHY FREEMASONRY SURVIVES

by Chauncey M Depew (1834-1928)

US Senator and Financier

Institutions do not survive through the ages by accident; they live only through the possession and operation of everlasting principles. When an organization runs back beyond historic records, and relies upon tradition for the story of its origin, its career during a known period either justifies or falsifies the tradition. An ancestry of virtue and good works is a liberal education. The power of the accumulated wisdom of the past is a resistless impelling force upon the present. The architects, the decorators, the draftsmen, the woodcarvers, the workers in precious metals and the Masons who were building the famous

Temple of King Solomon came from every nation in the then-known world. Their union of mutual help, protection, society and improvement was the marvel of an age when all navies were pirates and all nations enemies.

Masonry, marching under the leadership of God and the banner that bears the motto, "Love thy neighbor as thyself," with the peasant and the prince, the mechanic and the merchant, the learned and the unlearned following in equal rank and common step, knows neither race nor nationality, neither caste nor condition, as it proudly and beneficently moves down the centuries.

I would like to conclude with a Masonic prayer of sorts. This is from Rosslyn Chapel, the famous 15th century medieval chapel located in Roslin, Scotland:

Deep peace of Running Wave to you
Deep peace of the Flowing Air to you
Deep peace of the Quiet Earth to you
Deep peace of the Shining Stars to you
Deep peace of the Son of Peace to you.

So mote it be.

