

Is Freemasonry a Religion?

By John J. Robinson, author of *The Pilgrim's Path (One Man's Journey to Freemasonry)*

"I've lost count of how many times I have been asked, "Isn't Freemasonry a separate religion?" It's a question that creates a question: "How in the world did anyone come to believe that Masonry is a religion?" When I ask that, I am usually told by the callers that they heard the charge on an evangelist's broadcast, or read it in an anti-Masonic tract or book. No one who has asked me the question has claimed to have come up with the notion from personal knowledge or experience. The basic question has been addressed over and over again: "No, Masonry is not a religion. It has no intention of being a religion. It doesn't want to be a religion." But those replies rarely have any impact on non-Masons for the simple reason that the defence of Masonry is usually directed at other Masons, not at the masses who are the targets of the anti-Masonic evangelists. What is obviously needed is a broader audience for the defence.

One point that is confusing to many is the frequent statement by Masonic writers that Freemasons are "religious." They are, but being religious in no way carries with it the concept of being part of a separate religion. My own parents were very religious, but I really don't believe that they were a separate religion. Any minister of the gospel will agree that he is religious, but every one will deny that he considers his teachings to be those of a separate religion.

Usually, the allegation that Masonry is a separate religion is helped along by one or more blatant falsehoods; for example, the charge that Masonry has its own path to salvation, through the performance of good works. I never met a Mason who believed that, or who would be able to understand how anyone could ever draw such a conclusion. In practice, it is a handy point for anti-Masons, who are frequently confronted with, "But if the Masons are such evil people, how do you explain their free hospitals, their language-disorder clinics for children, their eye-care program, their homes for the elderly, and all those other Masonic charities?" The anti-Masonic answer comes back as, "The Masonic charities are not beloved of God because the Masons teach that good works are the way to salvation. That makes those charities against the will of God." That's sick, but it's what some of them say.

Masonry leaves it up to the individual Mason to choose his pathway to God, and that policy naturally includes no rules, advice, or admonitions as to the means of salvation. The Mason is expected, quite properly, to get that spiritual guidance from his own denomination, which he is encouraged to support with both his energy and his personal finances. Time after time in various lectures, the Freemason is told never to put his duties and responsibilities to the Masonic fraternity ahead of his duties and responsibilities to his church, to his country, and to his family. As for Masonic charities, whether they are organized major efforts or individual acts of kindness (such as aid to a destitute brother, or to his widow and their children), the Mason is told to make no gift that will affect his duty to care for his own family. In the ceremonies and lectures that lead to a man being raised to the status of Master Mason, he hears no description of heaven or hell. He hears no religious dogma. He hears no mention of Satan. He is told of no Masonic pathway to salvation for the simple reason that there is none. The only religious item in the Masonic lodge is the holy book* of the initiate's own faith. Since most Masons are Protestant Christians, that book is usually the King James version of the Bible. The initiate may be given a Masonic Bible by his lodge, his friends, or his family, but it varies from other editions of actual Scripture by not one single word. It is only a "Masonic" Bible because it also contains a brief history of Masonry, or a concordance to relate certain Masonic ritual to scriptural passages. Masons who are not Protestants* bring their own holy books for their initiations.

Let's start at the beginning: When a man decides to become a Mason, based on what he has seen, heard, or experienced, he files an application, or "petition," with a local Masonic lodge. In signing that petition he asserts that he believes in God, the Supreme Being, and in the immortality of the soul. In the lecture accompanying the initiation rites of the first degree, called Entered Apprentice, he is told that how he chooses to worship God is up to his own conscience. The religious experience in the lodge is prayer. Every meeting of Masons opens and closes with prayer. Every meal begins with prayer. As is done so often by the federal government (as, for example, with "In God we trust"), all prayer is addressed (or should be) to God the Father, so that a mixed audience of Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists, for instance, can relate that prayer to their own worship. Masons also offer prayers for charitable endeavors, for bereaved Masons and their families, or for a departed brother.

Clearly, one can easily assert that Freemasonry is not a separate religion. It promotes no heaven, no hell, and no means of salvation. There's no "witnessing" or arguing over religious beliefs in the lodge. There is no religious dogma. It can't be a religion. Nevertheless, it is frequently charged that the Masonic lodge has its own God, whose name is "The Great Architect of the Universe." That Masonic term is not a name; it is a designation or reference, as are all terms beginning with the word "The": The Almighty, The Creator, The Most High. If it starts with "The," it is not a name. So why do the Masons use that designation? Masonry, as its name implies, centres symbolically around the ancient builders of temples and cathedrals. It is natural for groups to fashion a designation for God that relates to their interests. In the military, I attended an outdoor church service conducted by a visiting chaplain, an ordained minister. He referred to God as "Our Supreme Commander-in-Chief in heaven." The Masons often do refer to God as The Great Architect of the Universe, but what's wrong with that? The architect is one who plans and brings a structure into being. Historians refer to the Founding Fathers as the "architects of the Constitution." As a designation for God, The Great Architect of the Universe makes sense, and it means precisely the same thing as the universally popular "The Creator." The slight difference is that the Masonic designation implies that God created the world according to a plan, although there is no Masonic description of what that plan may be.

*Judeo/Christians use the Holy Bible. Other faiths may use their Holy Book.

FREEMASONRY AND RELIGION

Basic Principles. Freemasonry is not a religion, nor is it a substitute for religion. It requires of its members belief in God as part of the obligation of every responsible adult, but advocates no sectarian faith or practice. Masonic ceremonies include prayers, both traditional and extempore, to reaffirm each individual's dependence on God and to seek divine guidance. Freemasonry is open to men of any faith, but religion may not be discussed at Masonic meetings.

The Supreme Being. Masons believe that there is one God and that people employ many different ways to seek, and to express what they know of, God. Masonry primarily uses the appellation, "Grand Architect of the Universe," and other nonsectarian titles, to address Deity. In this way, persons of different faiths may join together in prayer, concentrating on God, rather than differences among themselves. Masonry believes in religious freedom and that the relationship between the individual and God is personal, private, and sacred.

Volume of the Sacred Law. An open volume of the Sacred Law, "the rule and guide of life," is an essential part of every Masonic meeting. The Volume of the Sacred Law to a Christian is the Bible; to Freemasons of other faiths, it is the book held holy by them.

The Oath of Freemasonry. The obligations taken by Freemasons are sworn on the Volume of the Sacred Law. They are undertakings to follow the principles of Freemasonry and to keep confidential a Freemason's means of recognition. The much discussed "penalties," judicial remnants from an earlier era, are symbolic, not literal. They refer only to the pain any honest man should feel at the thought of violating his word.

Freemasonry Compared with Religion. Freemasonry lacks the basic elements of religion:

- (a) It has no dogma or theology, no wish or means to enforce religious orthodoxy.
- (b) It offers no sacraments.
- (c) It does not claim to lead to salvation by works, by secret knowledge, or by any other means. The secrets of Freemasonry are concerned with modes of recognition, not with the means of salvation.

Freemasonry supports Religion. Freemasonry is far from indifferent toward religion. Without interfering in religious practice, it expects each member to follow his own faith and to place his Duty to God above all other duties. Its moral teachings are acceptable to all religions."