

THE STUPID ATHEIST

by: Unknown

The first of the Old Charges, "Concerning God and Religion" begins: "*A Mason is obliged, by his tenure, to obey the moral law; and, if he rightly understands the art, will never be a stupid atheist***.*" That all petitioners for the degrees express a belief in Deity is a fundamental requirement. That all elected candidates who receive the entered Apprentice degree publicly express a belief in deity is a fundamental requirement. No lodge would accept the petition of any man unwilling to profess his faith in Deity. We are taught that no atheist can be made a Mason, and the reason usually assigned is that, lacking a belief in Deity, no obligation can be considered binding.

The real reasons for the non-acceptance of atheists into the Fraternity goes much deeper. We are not entirely accurate when we say that no obligation can be binding without taking an oath. Our courts of law permit a Quaker to "affirm" instead of taking an oath to tell the truth, inasmuch as a Quaker's religious belief does not permit him to swear. Yet a Quaker who tells an untruth after his affirmation is as subject to the penalty for perjury as the devout believer in God who first swears to tell the truth, and then fails to do so. The law holds a man truthful who affirms, as well as one who swears to tell the truth.

No atheist can be made a Mason, far less from lack of binding power of the obligation taken by such a disbeliever, than from Freemasonry's knowledge that an atheist can never be a Mason "in his heart." Our whole symbolism is founded on the erection of a Temple to the Most High. Our teachings are of the Fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man founded on that fatherhood, and the immortality of the soul in a life to come. A disbeliever in all these could by no possible chance be happy or contented in our organization.

What is an atheist?

The question has plagued many a Masonic scholar and thousands of men less wise. It is still a matter of perplexity to many a man who fears that the friend who has asked him to sign his petition is an atheist.

It is possible to spin long-winded theories about the word, draw fine distinctions, quote learned encyclopedias and produce a fog of uncertainty as to the meaning of "atheist" as hopeless as it is stupid. From Freemasonry's standpoint an atheist is a man who does not believe in Deity. Which immediately brings out the far more perplexing question: "What is this Deity in which a man must believe?" Here is where all the trouble and the worry comes on the scene. Man's idea of God differs with the man, his education, his early religious training. To some, the mental picture of God is that of a commanding, venerable figure with flowing white hair and beard - the great artist Dore so pictured God in his marvelous illustrated Bible. Such a conception fits naturally in a heaven of golden streets, flowing with milk and honey. White clothed angels make heavenly music on golden harps, the while Deity judges between the good and the evil.

Such an anthropomorphic God, derived from descriptive passages in the Bible, added to by the drawings of artists and crystallized in an age of simple faith, have given such a conception to many who find it adequate. Others conceive of Deity as a Bright Spirit, who moves through the universe with the speed of light, who is "without form" because without body, yet who is all love, intelligence, mercy and understanding. The man who believes in the anthropomorphic God describes his conception, then asks the brother who believes in a Bright Spirit: "Do you believe in my God?" If the answer is in the negative, the questioner may honestly believe him who answers to be an atheist.

The Deity of a scientist, a mathematician, a student of the cosmos via the telescope and the testimony of geology, may be neither anthropomorphic nor Bright Spirit, but a universally pervading power which some call Nature; others Great First Cause; still others Cosmic Urge. Such a man believes not in the anthropomorphic God, not in God as a Bright Spirit. Shall he call his brethren who do so believe, atheists? Have they the right so to denominate him? To the geologist, the very handwriting of God is in the rocks and earth. To the fundamentalist, the only handwriting of God is in the Bible. Inasmuch as the geologist does not believe in the chronology of the life of the earth as set forth in the Bible, the fundamentalist may call the geologist an atheist. Per contra, the geologist, certain that God has written the story of the earth in the rocks, not in the Book, may call the fundamentalist an atheist because he denies the plain testimony of science. One is a right, and each is as wrong, as the other! Neither is an atheist, "because each believes in the God which satisfies him!"

You shall search Freemasonry from Regius Poem, our oldest document, to the most recent pronouncement of the youngest Grand Lodge; you shall read every decision, every law, every edict of every Grand Master who ever occupied the Exalted East, and nowhere find an ukase that any brother must believe in the God of some other man. Nowhere in Freemasonry in England, its Provinces, or the United States and its dependent Jurisdictions, will you find any God described, cataloged, limited in which a petitioner must express a belief before his petition may be accepted. For Masonry is very wise, she is old, old and wisdom comes with age! She knows, as few religions and no other Fraternity has ever known, of the power of the bond which lies in the conception of an unlimited God.

A witty Frenchman was asked once: "Do you believe in God?" He answered: "What do you mean by God? Nay, do not answer. For if you answer, you define God. A God defined is a God limited, and a limited God is no God!" From Freemasonry's gentle standpoint, a God defined and limited is not the Great Architect of the Universe. Only God unlimited by definition; God without meets and bounds; God under any name, by any conception, is the fundamental concept of the Fraternity, and to believe in Whom is the fundamental requirement for membership.

In her Fellowcraft Degree Freemasonry teaches of the importance of Logic. It is perfectly logical to say that the finite cannot comprehend the infinite; a truism as exact as to say that light and darkness cannot exist in the same place at the same time, or that sound and silence cannot be experienced at the same moment. A mind which can comprehend infinity is not finite. That which can be comprehended by a finite mind is not infinite. Therefore it is logical to say that no man can comprehend God, since the only mind he has is finite.

But if a man cannot comprehend the God in Whom he must express a belief in order to be a Freemason, it is obviously the very height of folly to judge his belief by any finite comprehension of Deity. Which is the best of reasons why Freemasonry makes no attempt at definition. She does not say: "Thus and such and this and that is my conception of God, do you believe in HIM? She says nothing, allowing each petitioner to think of Him as finitely or as infinitely as he will. The agnostic frankly says: "I do not know in what God I believe, or how he may be formed or exist. I only know that I believe in something." Freemasonry does not ask him to describe his "something." If it is to him that which may be named God, no matter how utterly different from the God of the man who hands him the petition, Freemasonry asks nothing more. He must "believe." How he names his God, how he defines or limits Him, what powers he gives Him - Freemasonry cares not.

It is probable that the majority of those who profess atheism are mistaken in their reading of their own thoughts. An atheist may be an honest man, a good husband and father, a law abiding, charitable, upstanding citizen. If so, his whole life contradicts what his lips say. In the words of the poet: "*He lives by the faith his lips deny, God knoweth why!*" Many a man has reasoned about faith, heaven, infinity and God until his brain reeled at the impossibility of comprehending the infinite with the finite, and ended by saying in despair: "I cannot believe in God!" Then he has taken his wife or his child in his arms and there found happiness, completely oblivious to the most profound, as the most simple fact of all faiths and all religions; where love is, there is also God!

But Freemasonry does not go behind the spoken or written word. With a full understanding that many a man who defiantly denies the existence of God is actually not an atheist "in his heart" our Order nevertheless insists upon a plain declaration of belief. There is no compromise in Freemasonry; her requirements are neither many nor difficult, but they are strict. Having accepted the declaration, however, Freemasonry asks no qualifying phrases "Nor should any of us question a declaration." It is not for us to let our hearts be troubled, because a petitioner's conception of Deity is not ours. It is not for us to worry because he thinks of his God in a way which would not satisfy us. Freemasonry asks only for a belief in a Deity unqualified, unlimited, undefined. Her sons cannot, Fraternally, do less. When the great schism in Freemasonry ended in 1813, and the two rival Grand Lodges, the Moderns (who were the older) and the Ancients (who were the younger, Schismatic body) came together on St. John's Day to form the United Grand Lodge, they laid down a firm foundation on this point for all time to come. It was later declared to all by this, the primary, Mother Grand Lodge of all the Masonic World: "*Lets any man's religion or mode of worship be what it may, he is not excluded from the Order, provided he believes in the glorious Architect of Heaven and Earth, and practices the sacred duties of morality.*"

What a Mason thinks about the glorious Architect, by what name he calls Him. how he defines or conceives of Him, so far as Freemasonry is concerned may be a secret between Deity and brother, kept forever, "in his heart!"