

## Religion and Membership (Blyth Official Visit - September 17, 2012)

It seems to me that we Masons often have trouble explaining precisely what we are and what we do. For example, we are not a charity, rather, a charitable organization; likewise we are not a service club, yet we encourage community outreach and involvement. We are not an educational organization, yet encourage and practice Masonic education, and mentoring. We are not a secret society, we are a society with secrets. And that leads me to what I would like to talk about to-night - religion and membership in Masonry.

Our Craft is based on religious principles, it offers prayers and invocations at virtually every meeting and in each degree, and constantly admonishes us to adhere to the V.O.T.S.L., given for our guidance by the Supreme Being. We expect our membership to be honourable, moral and ethical, yet are quick to claim that we are not a religion, and more importantly, not a substitute for religion. We demand that all Masons profess a belief in a Supreme Being, and we expect each Brother to practice those beliefs within his own religion or faith. We make no effort to define, describe, or characterize the Supreme Being. We only ask belief in three things: that a Supreme Being exists, that the Supreme Being will punish vice and reward virtue and that the Supreme Being has revealed His will to man. The essential three questions asked first of every candidate and again of every initiate.

Now, I know we have a long standing admonition against discussing religion and politics within the Lodge – primarily because those two topics can provoke disagreements affecting the unanimity, fellowship and brotherhood we seek to foster. However, I am not proposing to discuss sectarian religion, instead, I want to talk about how religion, or lack of religion, might affect membership.

Masonry, we know, accepts all men of faith, whether Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, or Buddhist. We welcome Catholic or Protestant, fundamentalist or evangelical, episcopal or presbyterian. Our only requirement is that the applicant professes a belief in a Supreme Being. His beliefs about that Supreme Being are the concern of his conscience and his religion. Masonic philosophy is similar to the doctrine of theism, not just a belief in the existence of a God, but a philosophy which includes a belief in a personal God as creator and supreme ruler of the universe – one who transcends His creation, but works in and through it to reveal Himself to man. While it may not represent any specific religion, I think it likewise presents no conflict to any religion.

Which brings me back to my inspiration for to-night, a few questions V. W. Bro. Cliff Coultres posed in the Blyth Summons a few months ago:

*“An old friend of mine once commented that a man of his acquaintance was a nuisance. He kept coming and talking about religion to him. My friend said ‘ I have nothing against religion, I’m just not interested in it.’*

*The question arises: Could or could not this individual have qualified to become a Mason? He did not say he was an atheist or an agnostic. Is it possible to believe in a Supreme Being without being religious? If so, how can a religion be defined? And what does belief in a Supreme Being entail?*

Jumping a little, V. W. Bro. Coultres mentions the fellow in his scenario is neither an atheist nor an agnostic. Of course, an atheist is barred from Masonic membership. The landmarks of the Order clearly require that an initiate assert a belief in the existence of God as the G.A.O.T.U., and a belief

in resurrection to a future life. An atheist denies both and thus excludes himself as unacceptable for Masonry, as he cannot satisfactorily answer any of the three questions asked of him.

The status of an agnostic is perhaps not as cut and dried. An agnostic does not necessarily deny the existence of a Supreme Being, but may profess ignorance of those things beyond his own material world and experience. In theological terms, the agnostic professes the doctrine that God is unknown and unknowable, perhaps not denying His existence, merely that His existence is unknowable. For some, the agnostic, in a roundabout way, is stating a belief in the existence of a Supreme Being, but professing a lack of knowledge about Him. This is a position not unlike that of Masonry, a stated belief in God, but not about God; so perhaps, with some explanation he could give a satisfactory answer to the first question. For others, this argument is merely splitting hairs, and playing with words, for unless an applicant can clearly state his belief in the affirmative, he is not an acceptable candidate. Furthermore, if the characteristics of the Supreme Being are unknown and unknowable, then an agnostic cannot truly believe that the Supreme Being will reward virtue and punish vice, and he must certainly deny that the Supreme Being has revealed his will to man. Therefore, an agnostic cannot satisfactorily answer those questions, which would bar his acceptance. As has been said, Masonry is not for everyone.

But can a person believe in a Supreme Being without being religious, and more importantly for us, could such a person become a Mason? To perhaps pose the question differently, can you believe in a Supreme Being without belonging to a religion? If so, would you be religious?

I think yes, and here's why. As I said earlier, while a belief in God is required of every initiate, his conception of the Supreme Being is left to his own interpretation. Masonry is not concerned with what religion you follow, or even how dedicated you are to it. How rigorously you follow the dictates of your religion is entirely up to you. The only criterion is that you have a belief, that you have a faith. Masonry makes no attempt to prescribe how that faith is to be exercised.

So certainly, a person who has no interest in religion, in the sense that he does not wish to discuss his beliefs, attitudes, emotions or his relationship with the Deity with others should not be excluded from Masonry. Indeed, as we know, such discussions are prohibited behaviours when in the Lodge. To be honest, probably many of us here to-night might share those sentiments in our every day dealings with others.

If only religious people can believe in a Supreme Being, and you think of religious people as meaning only those who belong to an organized religion, or are registered members of a church, then you might think that, no, those who are not members of a religion could not made be a Mason. However, to paraphrase an old adage, going to church doesn't make you religious any more than going to a garage makes you an automobile. It is our behaviours, our words and actions, that define us, and if we take a larger view, and consider those who demonstrate their belief in a Supreme Being by how they behave and interact with others, who show a thorough and genuine fidelity, a strict performance of life's duties, while morally acting in a conscientious, pious, and devoted manner, then, yes, one can believe in a Supreme Being without being religious by that definition.

How can a religion be defined? What does a belief in the Supreme Being entail? As I said earlier, Masonry asks only that a Brother affirm his belief in a Supreme Being, it is his religion that tells him about God, about His, or Her, characteristics, about methods of worship, about sin and forgiveness. Masonry has no sacraments, no doctrines, no dogma and offers no salvation, as

these are all the realm of religion. If you want spiritual grace, you must attend a church, if you want salvation you must do it within the practice of your religion. There is no Masonic God. When a Mason prays to the G.A.O.T.U, the G.G.O.T.U., the M.H, or the S.B., his own religion is directing that prayer to the God he worships.

As Tim Dedopulos notes in *The Secret World of Freemasons*, Masonry does not claim to understand or define evil, or good, has no answers to deal with sorrow or grief, nor makes any claim to know what happens after we die. It has no solution for the world's ills, other than to try to be upstanding, morally decent people. Masonry teaches and encourages us to do better and make ourselves more acceptable to the G.A.O.T.U., but it is religion that provides the means to do so, and gives us guidance to religion's ultimate goal, salvation of the soul.

But when all is said and done, is it really that important that a candidate state his acceptance of our three questions? After all, maybe the three questions are now like the penalties of the obligations, 'purely traditional and not practiced' a relic of an earlier, simpler age?

I don't think so. If you don't believe there is a spiritual side to life, then you cannot genuinely be interested in spiritual development. If you do not believe that God has revealed his will and word, then you do not have any standards, any measures for your moral development. If you do not believe that God will reward virtue and punish vice, then what's the point of leading a just and upright life? Indeed, without these beliefs, what would be the point of Masonry?

The Supreme Being has given us the dictates for a well-lived life; Masonry provides the moral lessons to improve ourselves through self-knowledge and moral behaviour, through precept and example. Religion, by definition, offers a way of mediating and explaining the Spiritual World and its requirements, at its essence is the total meaning of life; it directs us to heaven. Masonry tries to help us be better people, it practices brotherhood, it teaches morality. The realm of religion is to change and improve the world, the realm of Masonry is to change and improve the man. Surely, no small task for either.

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