

**A
Response
to
Critics
of
Freemasonry**



**MASONIC
INFORMATION
CENTER**

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FROM NORTHERN IRELAND TO Iran, from the Middle East to the United States, religious extremism is a growing force throughout the world. Jarred by the rapid pace of social and cultural change, especially the apparent disintegration of moral values and the breakup of the family, some people within this movement have sought refuge from the complexity of modern life by embracing absolute views and rejecting tolerance of other beliefs.

Simple, easy, seemingly stable answers bring comfort in a rapidly changing world. For example, some churches have responded to the personal anguish of their members by circling the wagons, that is, by strictly defining theological concepts and insisting their members “purify” their fellowship by renouncing any other beliefs.

The next step, already taken by various churches, is to yield degrees of control within their ranks to vocal factions espousing extremist views. These splinter groups focus the congregation’s generalized anxieties on specific targets. The proffered cure-all is to destroy the supposed enemy. Freemasonry has become one of these targets precisely because it encourages members to form their own opinion on many important topics, including religion.

Thus some churches have expressed concerns, even condemnations, of Freemasonry. Generally, these actions are based on misunderstandings. A case in point is the June 1993 report to the Southern Baptist Convention by the Convention’s Home Mission Board. This report defined eight alleged conflicts between the tenets and teachings of the Masonic Fraternity and Southern Baptist theology.

Let’s briefly look at those areas as representative of the thinking of some well-meaning but misinformed church members today, and see if the concerns are real or

simply a matter of misinformation or misunderstanding.

Most of the issues really deal with language in one way or another. Almost every organization has a special vocabulary of words which are understood by the group. It’s hardly appropriate for someone outside a group, and without the special knowledge of the group, to object to the terms unless he or she fully understands them and why they are used.

If someone wants to read the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, for example, that is his right—but he doesn’t have a right to complain the articles use medical terms. A person reading a cookbook had better know terms like fold, cream the butter, or soft ball have special meanings—or he’ll make a mess instead of a cake.

The same is true of a non-Mason reading Masonic materials. As to the critique of Freemasonry by the Southern Baptist Convention (which, incidentally, had several positive things to say about Masonry), here is a brief explanatory discussion of each point.

“Offensive Titles”

Some don’t understand the historic source of the terms used in Freemasonry. They complain of “offensive” titles such as Worshipful Master for the leader of a Lodge. This is simply a matter of misunderstanding. The leader of the Lodge is called the Master of the Lodge for the same reason the leader of an orchestra is called the Concert Master, or a highly skilled electrician is called a Master Electrician, or the leader of a Scout troop is called a Scoutmaster.

Masonic use of the term Master originated in the guilds of the Middle Ages when the person most skillful was called the Master. Much Masonic vocabulary dates from that period. For instance, “Worshipful” is a term

still used in England and Canada today to refer to such officials as mayors of cities. Worshipful John Doe means exactly the same thing as The Honorable John Doe.

Also, in the John Wycliffe translation of the Bible, "Honor thy father and thy Mother" is translated "Worchyp thy fadir and thy modir." Some persons seem not to distinguish between "worshipful" and "worshipable." There is certainly nothing irreligious in the title as used in Masonry.

"Archaic, Offensive Rituals"

Some object to the use of "archaic, offensive rituals" and what they term "bloody oaths." There is nothing offensive in Masonic rituals, at least not to anyone who understands them. They are ancient, many of them so old their origins are long lost in history. But there is nothing bad in that. Many creeds and statements of faith are far older than the Masonic rituals. The Lord's Prayer is 2,000 years old, but no one suggests it be updated just because it was set down long ago. The Declaration of Independence is about the same age as the Master Mason degree, but few complain that it is "archaic."

As to the allegedly "bloody oaths," the historic penalties associated with the Masonic obligations have their origins in the legal system of medieval Europe and were actual punishments inflicted by the state on persons guilty of fighting for civil liberty and religious freedom. Included in the accused were many of the martyrs who died to secure the principle of religious toleration.

In Masonry, these penalties are entirely symbolic. They refer to the shame a good man should feel at the thought he had broken a promise, and they remind us of the price so many have paid for the liberties and freedoms Masons are pledged to protect.

"Paganism"

Some critics of Freemasonry claim the recommended readings for some of the degrees of Masonry are "pagan." Pagan, as they are using the term, simply means pre-Christian. The study of man's moral and intellectual history allows the achievement of Masonry's major purpose, the enhancement of an individual's moral and intellectual development. Such a study has to start with the concepts of man and God as held by early cultures and evidenced in their mythologies. The Greeks and Romans, as well as earlier peoples, had much of importance to say on many topics, including religion. The idea that a physician must act in the best interests of his patient comes from the pagan Hippocrates, and the concept that the government cannot break into your house and take what it wants on a whim comes from the pagan Aristotle. None of us would want to live in a world without these ideas.

In almost every field—law, government, music, philosophy, mathematics, etc.—it is necessary to review the work of early writers and thinkers. Masonry is no exception. But to study the work of ancient cultures is not the same thing as to do what they did or believe what they believed. And no Mason is ever told what he should believe in matters of faith. That is not the task of a fraternity, nor a public library, nor the government. That is the duty of a person's revealed religion and is appropriately expressed through his or her church.

The Bible as "Furniture"

Ironically, some people complain about the Bible in the lodge being referred to in Masonic ritual as the "furniture of the lodge." Again, it's a matter of not understanding how Masons use the word. Freemasons use "furniture" in its original meaning of "essential equipment." All lodges must have a Volume of the Sacred Law open

during every meeting. In North America, this is almost always the Bible which is an essential part of Freemasonry and its ritual.

The Meaning of "Light"

Others critics of Freemasonry are concerned that when Masons use "light" someone might think the word is referring to salvation rather than truth or knowledge. But that's a word confusion again. Light was a symbol of knowledge long before it was a symbol of salvation. The lamp of learning appears on almost every graduation card and college diploma. Masonry uses light as a symbol of the search for truth and knowledge. It is very unlikely any Mason would think Masonic "light" represents salvation.

"Salvation by Works"

Some believe Freemasonry teaches salvation may be attained by one's good works. Masonry does not teach any path to salvation. That is the job of a church, not a fraternity. The closest Masonry comes to this issue is to point to the open Bible and tell the Mason to search there for the path to eternal life.

Masonry believes in the importance of doing good works, but as a matter of gratitude to God for His many great gifts and as a matter of individual moral and social responsibility. The path to salvation is found in each Mason's house of worship, not in his lodge.

"Universalism"

There are those who claim some Masonic writers teach the "heresy of universalism." Universalism is the doctrine that all men and women are ultimately saved. Masonry does not teach universalism nor any other doctrine of salvation. Again, doctrines of salvation are the province of a church, not a fraternity. In point of fact, one has to look rather hard to find those

"many Masonic writers" who supposedly teach universalism, but even if you could find one, he's writing a statement of personal opinion. It's important to remember that any Masonic author writes for himself alone, not as an official of the Masonic fraternity. Masonry simply does not have a position, official or otherwise, on salvation. Since men of all faiths are welcome in Freemasonry, Masons are careful not to offend the faith of any. Possibly, that may seem to be universalism to some critics. Masons call it common courtesy.

Racial Exclusion

Some critics, more eager to attack Freemasonry than to put their own houses in order, allege "most Lodges refuse to admit African-Americans as members." Masonry is not a whites-only organization, as the hundreds of thousands of Black, Native American, Hispanic and Oriental Masons all over the world can testify. The petition for Masonic membership does not ask the race of the petitioner, and it would be considered completely wrong to do so.

At the international celebration of the 275th anniversary of the Grand Lodge of England in 1992 (the most recent Masonic gathering of about the same size as the Southern Baptist Convention) there were far more people of color present than there were at the Southern Baptist Convention in Houston in 1993.

At the same time, Masonry in America, like churches and society in general, has not lived up to its teaching of brotherhood as well as it should. That is changing, in Masonry as in society. While it is still true, as Martin Luther King, Jr., remarked, "Sunday morning at 10:00 is still the most segregated hour in America," it's getting better throughout all organizations.

Masonry Compatible with Christianity and Other Religions

Clearly, Freemasonry is compatible with religion. It may be incompatible, however, with the way a few narrowly focused people see religion. Of course, most of them feel that only they have the truth and that even many members of their own congregations are not as pure as they should be.

Masonry stands, as it has always stood, with open arms, saying, "Believe as your conscience dictates, and if you are a good man who believes in God and that there is more to life than work and play, if you believe that you have a responsibility to develop yourself and to benefit others, come join us."

Freemasonry is simply a fraternity—an organization of men banded together to develop themselves further ethically and morally and to benefit the community at large. Give yourself a chance to find out who we are. We're the next-door neighbors you've known all your life.



The Masonic Information Center is a division of The Masonic Service Association. The Center was founded in 1993 by a grant from John J. Robinson, well-known author, speaker, and Mason. Its purpose is to provide information on Freemasonry to Masons and non-Masons alike and to respond to critics of Freemasonry. The Center is directed by a Steering Committee of distinguished Masons geographically representative of the Craft throughout the United States and Canada.