

Shortly after a candidate enters a Freemason's Lodge, he is addressed by the Worshipful Master

(Note: A Worshipful Master has nothing to do with actual worship as a religious reference. It is in fact a title of honour, much like one would address the mayor of a city in certain western countries.):

WM: "In all cases of difficulty and danger, in whom do you put your trust?"

Candidate answers: "In G-d."

WM: "Right glad am I to find your faith so well founded: relying on such sure support you may safely rise and follow your leader with a firm but humble confidence, for where the name of G-d is invoked, we trust that no danger can ensue."³

Friedenberg⁴ begins his paper on the Place of Religion in Freemasonry with this story:

"My boy," I once heard a father address his son, "you make me rejoice by your wish and desire to become a Mason. I have been a member of the Craft now upwards of thirty years and, in all this long time, I believe rightly, have indulged great pride in my affiliation with the Fraternity. Its teachings are sublime; to follow its lessons in the daily tasks of life makes me a better man-at least, I hope I am a better man because I am a Mason. For, Freemasonry is my religion. It is a religion; isn't it?"

"Are you asking me this question? If you are, I am not loath to answer it according to my lights," I countered.

"Well," the father rejoined, "don't you look upon Freemasonry, your Masonry, my Masonry, the Masonry of us all, as a religion?"

"Frankly, I do not," I replied. "Freemasonry is not a sect in religion; it is a support of and an aid to all religions. Under certain of its aspects I shall allow that Freemasonry is a surrogate for the forms of religion, if you will. But it is no more than this."

From the foregoing colloquy, which actually occurred, this paper derives. For I hold that it is essential and useful for the benefit of Freemasonry to define, and to limit, the place of religion in Freemasonry, to explain the religious aspects of the work of the Craft, and to set forth in how far and to what extent religion, dogmatic and revealed, is a part of Freemasonry. Essential as well as useful, for the sake of the average member of the Fraternity who, like the father in the cited conversation, confuses that natural religion, the religion of all good men and true, that which is emphatically the centre of the Masonic system of morality and teaching, with dogmatic or sectarian religion.

This paper is based on a former (See www.dglsanorth.org.za), but explores more fully the question whether Freemasonry is a Religion and whether it is a Cult.

¹ This paper in no way represents the view of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

² This paper is partly based on a former: Freemasonry and faith (See www.dglsanorth.org.za)

³ Emulation Ritual, p. 67 - 68

⁴ Albert N. Friedenberg; "The Place of Freemasonry in Religion", New York Masonic Outlook, May 1927, p 1.

IS FREEMASONRY A RELIGION?

One of the biggest misconceptions about Freemasonry is that it is a **religion**. Freemasons do not claim to be a religion nor is it a substitute for religion. The reason we say this is because of the following:

1. It offers no system or teaching of salvation in the traditional religious sense of the word;
2. It has no dogma (i.e an official system of principles or tenets concerning faith, etc.), no confession of faith, no central theology;
3. It has no institutionalized system of worship and no ritual of worship (i.e surrendering yourself to God. Humbling yourself for Him, so that He can change you and bring you closer to Him⁵); and
4. It has no symbols that are religious, like the symbols that are found in a church.⁶

Members are pointed to the “straight and undeviating line of conduct laid down for our pursuit” in the VSL (Bible or whatever sacred writings they revere) and are encouraged to be active in whatever religion or church they belong to in their individual search for the “path of salvation”.

That doesn't mean that its members are not **religious**. For those people who are unfamiliar with Freemasonry, its religious aspects can certainly be confusing. I will endeavour to explain:-

- i. The organization requires of all its members to firstly profess a **belief in a Supreme Being** and the immortality of the soul. Freemasonry does not interfere with any member's religion, the only concern being that all members hold their own faith in a Supreme Being in high regard. Atheists or agnostics are therefore not accepted.

(Note: The only instances where atheists are accepted are in irregular masonic organizations not officially warranted or recognized by a Grand Lodge.)

- ii. Freemasonry is thus an **organization of believers**. Brent Morris, a masonic historian writes⁷:
“When it started on a formal basis in 1717, many historians believe that it was trying to bridge the gap between the religious civil wars that had been going on in England at the time. The Catholics would get in power and beat up the Protestants; the Protestants would get in power and beat up the Catholics; and everyone was beating up the Jews.”

At this time there were social, political and religious factors which created the opportunity for the formation of the Grand Lodge and the Constitutions. Despite the strength and intensity of the forces unleashed by the Reformation and Counter Reformation, there was a new spirit of liberalism in Europe and the U.K. There was a great increase in literacy. There was a growing sense that Europe had grown tired of religious intolerance and bigotry. Having been banned from the U.K. for a number of centuries, Jews were permitted to enter and settle there.

⁵ www.urbandictionary.com

⁶ Alphonse Cersa, “*Let there be Light: a study in anti masonry*”, The Masonic Service Association, 1983, p.41

⁷ Brent Morris, as quoted by David Morgan, “*9 Things you didn't know about Freemasonry.*”; 8 December 2013, www.cbsnews.com

So when Freemasonry was formally formed, society noticed that: “Here’s a group of men that agree that God is central in their lives, they can even agree that God compels them to do good in the community, then they can remain silent after that.”⁸ That was a radical concept – that men could get together and agree on that fundamental level, and then get on with their lives.

- iii. Freemasonry **does not produce or induce faith**: it expects its members to be men of faith, professing faith in God according to their own personal faith and the understanding of their religion, **before** they join the organization. According to Coates⁹ “The Initiate does not **receive** faith after joining. Freemasonry confirms and strengthens that faith and provides its members with an opportunity to exercise and share faith with others in a very practical way. Obviously, no person can affirm faith unless they have been exposed to and have a prior knowledge of (G-d) – who had revealed Himself in the TVOTSL” With that common denominator all members enter the organization on the level with each other. There are certain subjects which are prevented or is simply proscribed from discussing within the lodge: Religion is one. Politics is another.

Coates¹⁰ states that “A charge laid against Freemasonry by churches is that it offers an ersatz “Way of Salvation” which is deceptive and leads men into accepting a substitute for real religion based on Divine revelation and thus hinders men from accepting God’s revealed plan. Especially the Evangelics see the “Way of Salvation” in terms of REPENTANCE, FAITH, REDEMPTION. They say that Freemasonry offers Salvation by the “Path of Enlightenment” ... (or good works) – in other words: Man save thyself by way of a plan devised by man himself. ...Freemasonry does not offer a “path of enlightenment,” nor of SALVATION ... it only offers a BROTHERHOOD which crosses all religious and national boundaries and does not in any way diminish the personal faith of any of its members – rather it enhances it.” Freemasons are directed to “... that straight and undeviating line of conduct laid down for our pursuit in the Volume of the Sacred Law.” The Holy Bible clearly teaches that salvation is not by man’s work – salvation is only by G-d’s gracious provision. Freemasonry provides the opportunity for the believer to express, in practical terms, the faith they had held before joining and putting the result of this faith into practice through the tenants of Freemasonry, namely brotherly love, relief (charity) and truth.

- iv. Many say that the fact that God is addressed in Freemasonry as the “**Architect and Creator of the Universe**” indicates that Freemasons have another “god”. This is not true. God has revealed Himself to man in Scripture under many Names e.g.
- a) Elohim [the Strong One] (Gen 1:1);
 - b) Adonai [Lord/Master] (Jos 5:14; Isaiah 6:8-11);

⁸ Brent Morris, Ibid; 8 December 2013., www.cbsnews.com

⁹ Rev Albert Coates (Methodist Minister & District Grand Chaplain SC), “The Churches and Freemasonry”; October 1988, p. 23

¹⁰ Rev Albert Coates; Ibid, p. 24

- c) Yahweh [I am the One who is](Ex 3:14); And we often hear people using the compounds of this name, namely
- Yahweh Jireh [the Lord provides] (Gen 22:14)
 - Yahweh Nissi [The Lord is my Banner] (Exodus 17:1)
 - Yahweh Shalom [the Lord is Peace] (Judges 6:24)
 - Yahweh Sabbaoth [the Lord of Hosts] (1 Samuel 1:3)
 - Yahweh Maccaddeschem [the Lord your Sanctifier] (Ex 31"13)
 - Yahweh Raah [the Lord is my Shepherd] (Ps 23:1)
 - Yahweh Tsidkenu [the Lord our Righteousness] (Jer 23:6)
 - Yahweh Shammah [the Lord is there] (Ezekiel 48:3)
 - Yahweh Elohim [the Lord God of Israel] (Judges5:3)
- d) Theos [God] (Matthew 1:23);
- e) Kurios [Lord] (Matthew 5:33; Mark 5:19)
- f) Despotes [Master] (Acts 4:24)
- g) Pater [Father] (John 4:24; 15;16)
- h) Technites kai demiourgos [**Architect** and builder] (Heb 11:10)

When believers refer to God, using one of those Names, they do so acknowledging the characteristic of God in and for that situation – this does not imply that we as Believers (or Freemasons) are praying to another god. Freemasons use the allegory of building to teach its members morals and it stands to reason that it will, within that situation, refer to God as the Architect and Creator/Builder of the Universe (Heb 11:10).

As a Christian Minister I personally believe in the Trinitarian God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit and that Jesus is the only way to salvation. He is the Truth and there is no Truth apart from Him. I stand by the Apostle's Creed and believe every word contained therein with my whole being.

- v. Freemasonry requires of all its members to believe that **God has revealed Himself, His will and purpose in the Volume of the Sacred Law** as the **Holy Bible** is reverently known. Dr J Moffat (quoted by Coates¹¹) says that "Masonry seemed by its teaching on Brotherhood to offer an opportunity of giving expression, in a practical way, to this new movement (that had arisen in the eighteenth century)... It had however, to justify its claim by showing that it had Divine sanction by appealing to Holy Scripture, for the Bible was regarded as being the Rule of Faith and Morals." In other words, Freemasonry subjected itself to the Bible, and by that it will be judged – by that it stands and falls.

¹¹ Rev Albert Coates; Ibid, p. 21

Thus when speculative Freemasonry originated in the eighteenth century most of its members were Christian and as such the Holy Bible, mainly the Authorized Version as we know it, is open in all Lodge meetings (there is no masonic version of the Bible). Freemasons are, however, tolerant of all religions professing faith in a Supreme Being and in lodges with memberships comprising of a variety of faiths, several different sacred texts, such as the Quran or Torah may be used. The sacred text is given a place of honour in a lodge, and lies open on a pedestal or table, but is never used, as in a church, to teach dogma.

All men meet as equals in a Lodge. With their hands upon or holding the VSL that is revered by their system of faith, they make their obligations of fealty to Freemasonry "...without evasion, equivocation, or mental reservation of any kind"¹². To make an obligation binding to one's conscience, on a sacred writing that you do not believe in, with respect, is discourteous and makes such an obligation null and void. It is not only Freemasons who obligate their members on the VSL, for example heads of state are commonly obligated on a Bible. British Sovereigns and all American Presidents were obligated on a Bible (Four of them¹³ were obligated on the "Washington Bible" belonging to St Johns Lodge #1 in New York.¹⁴)

It is of interest to note that when a new member is admitted, he is often given a copy of the Holy Bible. Members are pointed to the Holy Bible as being the "straight and undeviating line of conduct laid down for our pursuit. "

As a Christian Minister I believe that "*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training of the righteous so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*) (2 Tim. 3:16-17) I preach the gospel of Jesus at ALL times and my sermons and Bible studies are available to test whether that is true. (See www.amc.org.za)

- vi. Freemasons **begins and closes every meeting with prayer**. The prayers that are offered are very specific. They focus on God, addressed as the Architect and Creator of the Universe or the Most High God and on man's continuous need of His guidance, His blessing and His acceptance of the work done in His Name and to His glory. Freemasonry constantly reminds its members of the "duty they owe to God, to their neighbours and themselves" and urges its members to spend part of each day in prayer and speaks clearly of "the posture of your daily supplications."

With respect I do not think that this makes Masonry a religion as little as it makes meetings of our Government or school assemblies or Round Table meetings a religion when they are opened with a prayer. I do not find this in conflict with my Christian witness and beliefs and am grateful that an organization I belong to, still hold this as important in our modern world where this is often frowned on.

IS FREEMASONRY A CULT?

¹² Emulation Ritual, p.76

¹³ George Washington 1789; Warren Hardy 1921; Dwight Eisenhower 1953; & George H. W Bush 1989, www.memory.loc.gov

¹⁴ Washington Bible; www.masonicinfo.com ()

Freemasonry is often accused of being a “**Cult**”.

The *American Heritage Dictionary*¹⁵ gives an accurate definition of a Cult. It defines “cult” six different ways that make for an ideal analysis.

- i. *A religion or religious sect generally considered extremist or false;*
- ii. *A system or community of religious worship and ritual;*
- iii. *The formal means of expressing religious reverence, religious ceremony and ritual;*

These three definitions are clearly off target, as already indicated, that Freemasonry has never been, and never claimed to be, a religion. Freemasons are never discouraged from pursuing their personal religious beliefs and are free to worship the Supreme Being of their choosing. Religion is not discussed in a lodge at all!

- iv. *A usually nonscientific method or regimen claimed by its originator to have exclusive or exceptional power in curing a particular disease;*

No medical claims or restrictions of any sort are inferred or expected in Freemasonry.

- v. *Obsessive, especially faddish, devotion to or veneration for a person, principle or thing;*

Rational behavior and independent thinking are highly valued elements of Freemasonry. There is no single person who leads Freemasonry, and all Masons are encouraged to participate in leadership roles within the lodge, and within their communities. While Freemasons use symbolism and objects as instructional tools, members are permitted to apply their own interpretation and meanings. After several hundred years of organized existence, Freemasonry is most decidedly not a fad.

- vi. *An exclusive group of persons sharing an esoteric, usually artistic or intellectual interest.*

This definition is possibly the closest in description to Freemasonry, but even from its very beginnings exclusivity was one of the many social and intellectual barriers that Masons most definitely did not subscribe to. Masonic membership is open to all men equally. Nor are their restrictions that bar a Mason from joining any other organization or group.

Also not fitting into a dictionary definition of the term “cult”, Freemasons are free to terminate their membership at any time, with no repercussions. Masons are never compelled to remain affiliated and most significantly, no one is asked or forced to join the organization. Becoming a Freemason is done entirely of one’s own free will.

¹⁵ Barb Kiarg & John K. Young; “101 Things you didn’t know about Freemasons.” Adams Media, 2006; p163 – 164.

4. **Conclusion**

In an age when the world has been torn asunder and still is being torn asunder by conflicts of race, religion and ideologies, Freemasonry stands as a witness to the fact that all honourable men can find their common humanity and share a common concern regardless of race and religion.

The questions of whether or not Freemasonry is a religion and/or a cult, is most assuredly answered with one word:

“NO”.

I am quite sure that my own faith was not diminished, nor were my convictions altered by my membership of Freemasonry. Rather I have been enriched and rewarded beyond measure. I have not been untrue to my ordination vows, but have embraced a ministry of service which stretches beyond the boundaries of my church to the fraternity of Freemasonry.

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9. Washington Bible; www.masonicinfo.com