

The Grand Lodge of Scotland is looking into the future about a subject that rarely occurs to most of us within the fraternity - the decreasing population of men who actually believe in a Supreme Being. And the numbers don't look good in the UK, at least, and Scotland in particular.

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## 'Godless' Scotland could doom Freemasons

*By Jody Harrison*

**SCOTLAND'S Freemasons have admitted that their future may be under threat because of the rise of atheism.**

Senior figures in the organisation have reportedly expressed concern over the number of people turning their backs on religion, with about half the country now saying they do not attend church.

Individuals can only be initiated into the Grand Lodge of Scotland if they state their belief in a "supreme being", something at odds with an increasingly Godless society.

The lodge posted a chart based on the 2011 census on its official Facebook page, showing that people living north of the border are most likely to declare they follow no particular faith.

The page stated: "This graphic foretells of a looming problem and it is one that will be upon us sooner or later." The Grand Lodge declined to comment further, but key figures within the organisation are believed to consider the census findings a long-term problem.

Last year the male-only organisation revealed that its number of new recruits had fallen to around 2,000 today from a high of 45,000 a century ago.

The Grand Lodge of England acknowledged the concerns of its sister organisation but said that it was more upbeat about its own future.

Mike Baker, its director of communications, said: "Our present experience is that whilst formal religious observance is on the decline, most people still have some form of personal faith or belief system."

**“WHY CAN ATHEISTS NOT BECOME FREEMASONS?”** by Deacon Dr Vernon van Wyk, PM, DG Chap (EC)

When the great schism in Freemasonry ended in 1813, and the two rival Grand Lodges in England, 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 of England, they laid down the following firm foundation for all time to come. It was later followed by all regular Grand Lodges in the Masonic World:

*“Let 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.”*

There is thus a universal requirement, that a person must profess faith in Deity **before** a candidate may join the fraternity. As Moray in his *Dictionary of Freemasonry* puts it,

*“Freemasonry accepts the idea of God, as a supreme fact, and bars its gates with inflexible sternness against those who deny His existence.”*<sup>1</sup>

It is still a matter of perplexity to many a man who fears that the friend who has asked him to sign his petition for membership, does not believe in Deity - is an Atheist.

Before we continue, let us then define what we mean.

Stephen Dafoe in the *Masonic Dictionary*<sup>2</sup> give the following helpful explanation:

*“The Greek for God was **Theos**; when the prefix “a” was placed before it, we get the origin of “**atheism**,” signifying a denial of the god, or gods. The word should be distinguished from “**agnosticism**,” which means neither to affirm, nor to deny, but to remain in doubt; and from “**infidel**,” which means that one does not believe some doctrine.*

*Christians call Mohammedans “infidels” because they do not believe the Bible;*

*Mohammendans call Christians “infidels” because they do not believe the Koran.*

From Freemasonry's standpoint thus, an Atheist is a man who denies the existence of Deity/ God/ Supreme Being, and he cannot be admitted to the Order.

**So, which God are we talking about?** - YHVH, the Holy Trinity, Allah, Shiva?

This question has plagued many a Masonic scholar and thousands of men less wise.

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 old and wise standpoint, a God defined and limited is not the Great Architect of the Universe. Only God unlimited by definition; God without requirements and bounds; God under any name, by any conception, is the fundamental concept of the Fraternity, and belief in Whom, is a personal, private and sacred matter between the individual and God, as he understands and believes in Him. Freemasonry does not say: *“Thus and such and this and that is my conception of God, do you believe in HIM?”* We say nothing, allowing each petitioner to think of Him as finitely or as infinitely as he will.

The agnostic may frankly say: *“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

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<sup>1</sup> Macoy, R (2000), *A Dictionary of freemasonry*, New York: Gramercy Books, p156

<sup>2</sup> Dafoe, S, [www.masonicdictionary.com](http://www.masonicdictionary.com)

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 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 only asks, upfront, for a belief in a Deity unqualified, unlimited, undefined and thereafter any discussion of a man’s faith in Lodge is strictly prohibited. ....

Although there is no place for Atheists in the Craft, it is not always clear why many ostensible good men are excluded from membership. Much of the literature written over the last century point either to the perspective that Atheists are incapable of following Moral Law and can therefore not be counted among the Craft; or on the other hand because Atheists do not believe in God or Divine Retribution, they are somehow not of the same standing as us. Both these perspectives are outdated arrogant and prejudicial! For the sake of this talk, however, I will deal with these two perspectives.

### **The Morality perspective.**

The first perspective is that Atheists are incapable of following God’s Moral Law, and they are therefore incapable of meeting on the square. The most often quoted example of this comes from Rev. James Anderson’s *Constitutions of Free-Masons*.<sup>3</sup>

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, he will never be a **stupid atheist**, nor an **irregular Libertine**”.

The question we need to answer for ourselves is: **Can an Atheist follow Moral Law?**

From an areligious perspective, an Atheist can hold the same values that a non-Atheist holds, but for different reasons. A religious man may hold moral law to be a sacred or divine teaching, whereas a man without religion, may believe that “*doing good*” is beneficial to himself and all of humanity, though not link it to God. Therefore, Atheists are capable of reaching the same end, that of acting uprightly, though they may have used different means to arrive at that conclusion.

If Atheists can practice brotherly love, relief and truth, then, why deny them admittance to the Order? Paton<sup>4</sup> in *Freemasonry: Its Two Great Doctrines the Existence of God and a Future State* (1878) suggests that the Atheist “... *acknowledges no relation to God which should lead to fear, or hope, or love, or obedience. To him, as to the most absolute speculative Atheist, the moral law is nothing.*” (p.154) Paton suggests that following a moral law is for a non-believer but a whim, a fleet of fancy which may be turned upon, because a man who does not fear God has no reason to remain moral.

Perhaps the best example of this philosophy was given by Albert Pike<sup>5</sup> in his *Morals and Dogma of 1871*:

The intellect of the Atheist would find matter everywhere; but no Causing and Providing Mind: his moral sense would find no Equitable Will, no Beauty of Moral Excellence, no Conscience enacting

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<sup>3</sup> Anderson, J (1723), *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons: Containing the History, Charges and Regulations of that most Ancient and Right Worshipful Fraternity*, London: William Hurter. p.50

<sup>4</sup> Paton, C (1878) *Freemasonry: Its Two Great Doctrines: The Existence of God and a Future State*, London: Reeves and Turner

<sup>5</sup> Pike, A (1871), *Morals and Dogma*. Accessed via <https://pikequotes.wordpress.com>

justice into the unchanging law of right, no spiritual Order or spiritual Providence, but only material Fate and Chance. His affections would find only finite things to love; and to them the dead who *were* loved and who died yesterday, are like the rainbow that yesterday evening lived a moment and then passed away. His soul, flying through the vast Inane, and feeling the darkness with its wings, seeking the Soul of all, which at once is Reason, Conscience, and the Heart of all that is, would find no God, but a Universe all disorder; no Infinite, no Reason, no Conscience, no Heart, no Soul of things; nothing to reverence, to esteem, to love, to worship, to trust in; but only an Ugly Force, alien and foreign to us, that strikes down those we love, and makes us mere worms on the hot sand of the world. No voice would speak from the Earth to comfort him.

Paton<sup>6</sup> adds the idea that Freemasons believe in a “Future State”, which he defines loosely as rewards and punishments to be given in the life after this. In this case, Paton makes the point that without belief in a Supreme Being or afterlife, there is no immortal consequence to breaking moral law. This has historically been a key reason for denying Atheists admittance to the Order – they cannot be trusted to maintain morality. This is an extremely weak and biased perspective! Although it is true that Atheists have no belief in immortal consequences, good men tend to be good men; whether they be Freemasons or not. Using this as the argument to keep Atheists out of Freemasonry is hardly sufficient.

The other perspective often repeated in Masonic Literature dealing with the subject of Atheists is that those who do not believe in a God are somehow baser than those who do believe. The effect of allowing Atheists entry into Freemasonry according to Ernst<sup>7</sup> “... would be to lessen confidence and weaken friendship, and no obligation would be regarded as binding among men ... Mankind would give way to the most unrestrained cruel, and base passions of their worst natures. The very foundations of good order would be subverted, and society would soon degenerate into a state of anarchy.”

This is an even more prejudiced view than that Atheists cannot be trusted to uphold moral law, though there are connections between them. Anderson’s reference to Atheists as “*stupid*” (meaning base, not of lower intelligence), implies the belief that non-believers are less of men. This, in addition to the aforementioned arguments, make up the bulk of the arguments opposing the Atheist’s admission to the Lodge. In the time since most of the above-cited works were written, we as secular, Western Society have moved beyond the name-calling and prejudices that plagued our forefathers. There is no place for bigotry in Freemasonry!

## Religiosity in Freemasonry

None of the theory or philosophy presented thus far has satisfactorily gotten to the heart of the issue: “WHY CAN ATHEISTS NOT BECOME FREEMASONS?” Answers of “*that’s the way it has always been*” have been proffered. However, this excuse is on its surface weak. There was a time when **only men** of sound body were admitted; several Grand Lodges, including the Grand Lodge of Scotland and the United Grand Lodge of England, have been admitting men with physical deformities. The United Grand Lodge of England will not deny a former female who has had gender reassignment surgery to become a male, to be admitted to the Craft, nor will it revoke the membership of a former male member who has had gender reassignment surgery to become a female. Other changes have been made over time; admitting Atheists would only be a

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<sup>6</sup> Paton, C Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ernst, J (1870), *The Philosophy of Freemasonry...* Cincinnati: Jacob Ernst & co (p69-70)

modernizing adaptation. Why then in the culturally accepting 21<sup>st</sup> century, is there still no room for Atheists in Freemasonry?

The prime reason for continuing to deny Atheists admittance to Freemasonry, is the presence of God and religion throughout our Masonic beliefs. Belief in God has clearly been at the core of Freemasonry since its inception. Surviving 15<sup>th</sup> century records indicate that there were religious overtones in Masonry as early as c.1430, when the document known as the Regus MS was written. Given the obvious influence of the Church, when our predecessors still hewed stone and built magnificent cathedrals, on what was to become Speculative Freemasonry, ritual and belief system within the Lodge was "*erected to God.*" By itself the ritual we practice has overtones of the Grand Architect of the Universe. These rituals would make Atheists –

(a) uncomfortable given their individual denial of God, and

(b) unable to understand the nuances of Freemasonry, given the absolute importance Masons put on faith in God.

Beyond ritual, the myths and legends that make Freemasonry what it is today, are inherently religious.

Should Freemasonry be only a society of fraternity, with no religious component, such as the Johannesburg Country Club, or a charity-only organization, such as Rotary International, these stringent requirements regarding an individual's beliefs would not be important. Our Fraternity, however, is one with religious components. We need look no further than the Ritual presented to a Candidate during the First Degree. The Candidate is asked, "*In all cases of difficulty and danger, in whom do you put your trust?*" And answers, "*In God,*" thereby acknowledging a belief in Deity. He is told that since his trust is in God, he may "*...safely rise and follow your leader with a firm but humble confidence, for where the name of God is invoked, we trust no danger can ensue.*" In other words, to proceed past the first moments in the Lodge, one must affirm his faith in Deity.

Naturally, such a display would be impossible for someone who does not hold a belief in a Supreme Being. One might assume that an Atheist, not being tied to his morality, would lie (as has been suggested by some); but to what end? What would an Atheist see in open lodge that would interest him and induce him to wilfully perjure himself? Would he still be a "*...fit and proper person to be made a Mason?*"

As the Ritual stands, an incredible number of references are made to the Volume of the Sacred Law, to God and our submission to Him. A Candidate would have to take a solemn obligation "*... without evasion, equivocation or mental reservation of any kind*" and invoke the assistance of God to keep him "*...steadfast in this my Great and Solemn Obligation ...*" Lacking a belief in Deity, no obligation can be considered binding. An Atheist in such surroundings would likely feel out of his depth.

Freemasonry's whole symbolism is founded on the erection of a Temple to the Most High God "*not made with hands*". 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.

Looking no further than the Final Charge after Initiation it is clear that a firm belief in God is required as it earnestly recommends, and I quote:

“As a F....., I would first recommend to your most serious contemplation the V of the S.L., charging you to consider it as the unerring standard of truth and justice, and to regulate your actions by the **Divine** precepts it contains—as therein you will be taught the important duties you owe to **God**, to your neighbour, and to yourself.

To **God**, by never mentioning His name but with that **awe and reverence** which are due from the creature to his Creator, by imploring **His aid** on all your lawful undertakings, and by looking up to **Him** in every emergency for comfort and support.”

An Atheist would find it impossible to identify and comply with this Charge!

In his book *The Religion of Freemasonry*, Newton<sup>8</sup> writes,

*“Other foundation there is none; upon **God** Masonry builds its temple of Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth ... **God** is the first Fact and the final Reality – the Truth that makes all other truth true; the cornerstone of faith, the keystone of thought, the capstone of home ... Everything in Masonry has reference to **God**, implies **God**, points and leads to **God**. Not a degree, not a symbol, not an obligation, not a lecture, not a charge but finds its meaning and derives its beauty from **God**, the Great Architect, in whose Temple all Masons are workmen”.*

## CONCLUSION

It is therefore impossible to allow an Atheist to join our Order, because they are incapable of measuring themselves against the will of God, to whom all Freemasons must show reverence. Though an Atheist may be a good man in the traditional sense of the word, as someone who acts nobly and charitably towards his fellow man, he is missing a vital component of Masonry: **reverence to God**. It is only through God that a man may be made a Mason, for it is only through appropriate “**reverential awe which is due from a creature to his Creator**” that a man can be an appropriate candidate. It is here that the good, noble and charitable Atheist falls out of the Masonic bus!

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<sup>8</sup> Newton, J.F (1927) *The Religion of Freemasonry: An Interpretation*, The Masonic Services Association of the United States. (p 58 - 60)