

MASONRY AND RELIGION

Every brother must decide for himself whether freemasonry has, or has not, is or is not, a religion.

Without argument pro or con a few thoughts are here set forth by which such decision may be illuminated; doubtless he who decides in the negative will herein find support for his position, and perhaps he who finds joy in the belief that Freemasonry is more than a Fraternity, and that the ancient Craft is not alone of this, but of two worlds, may be comforted.

To discuss any subject intelligently it is necessary that those who speak and those who listen have a common understanding of the terms used. It will hardly be necessary here to define Freemasonry although many have phrased many definitions. But it does seem essential that the reader and the writer have one mind as to what is meant by religion.

The terms has many meanings in many minds. For instance: "What is the religion of the United States?" is a question intelligently answered by: "On the whole, Protestant," by those who think of religion as made up of modes of worship which may be Episcopalian or Catholic, Jewish or Mohammedan, Baptist or Buddhist. But change the tense and ask: "What are the "Religions" of the United States," and the only complete answer will be a catalog of all the faiths followed in this country.

There is, then, a difference between "the religion" and "the religions." Carried a step further, there is a great distinction between "a religion" and "religion." Any qualifying article seems to connote a special variety of theology; it is only when we forget that "a" and "the" that we come to that experience of the heart which is essential religion.

Some deny that in Freemasonry is "anything" religious, let alone religion. "Freemasonry as we know it was born in a tavern in London; how can it be religious?" has been asked by those who forget that lilies bloom on a dung hill and that the carpenter who walked by Galilee was born in a stable. But to those to whom Freemasonry is but a social order these words are not addressed; he who can avow a belief in God, kneel at his Altar, take vows in His name, receive the teachings of the Lodge and deny "any" kinship with worship of the Great Architect is not within the reach of words here to be printed. Religion is most emphatically not theology; more's the pity, the two are all too frequently confused. Religion is consciousness of, kinship with, worship for a Supreme Being; theology is the means, the method, the science of such worship. Theology is the manual of astronomy, but it is the stars in the sky towards which we reach; theology is the craft of mixing colors, but man thrills to the sunset without knowing even the names of its hues.

Nor is it necessary here to say that Freemasonry inculcates no theology. Every Freemason must affirm the existence of Deity; he is an unhappy Freemason indeed for whom a life to come is not a fact, but nowhere about the Altar of the Great Architect in a Lodge, in no words of any

Masonic ritual, is there a symbol or phrase setting forth by what ways or means a brother is to claim kinship with the Unseen Presence.

Millions of reverent men never even heard of the term "theology," still less know its meaning. But there lives no man who does not know of God - aye, even if he knows but to deny him. R.W. Brother Joseph Fort Newton, of the Golden Pen and understanding heart, who sees more in life and religion and Freemasonry than is given to many a brother formed of more common clay; has written:

"There is in human nature a spiritual quality, by whatever name it is described; to express which some contrive theologies, others write rituals and others sing anthems. It is a part of our human endowment, at once the foundation of our faith and the consecration of our labor. It emerged with man, revealing itself in love and birth, joy and woe, pity and pain and death; in the blood in the veins of men, the milk in the breasts of women, the laughter of little children, in the ritual of the seasons - all the old, sweet, sad and happy human things - adding a rhythm and pathos to mortal life. Older than all creeds, deeper than all dogmas, it is the voice out of the heart of the world; the account which life gives of itself when it is healthy, natural and free."

It is this sense of one-ness with an invisible Absolute, of a touch with matters spiritual none the less true that they are too ethereal to phrase; of the reality of that which is the more all embracing that it is unseen, unheard, untouched and unknown; which is here meant by the term "religion," with no qualifying article to fence it into the narrow confines of any creed or special faith. It is "that natural religion in which all men agree" as the wise fathers but it in the first of the Old Charges of a Freemason.

Modern science teaches us that what we see and taste and touch and feel is but the shadow of reality. In the eyes of science the common chair on which we sit is a vast space filled with vibrating electrons and protons, too small to conceive, too speedy to envisage. The space we know and move in is but a phase of time; the intervals we measure on a clock face are but parts of a "space-time continuum." In somewhat the same way, neither Freemasonry nor religion are really as we see them; they are but shadows of a greater reality behind. In a certain theatrical production it was necessary to introduce the Christ. To do so with a reverence which should offend no one, the producer showed His presence merely by a glory of light which came, and passed, and went. Religion is such a glory - a light from One Passing Unseen. In all reverence, Freemasonry too, is a hidden sun of which we know only the shadows cast by brethren as they move against it.

It will be news to none that Freemasonry has secrets; but to some the concept will be new, that the greatest secret is one which none need take an obligation never to reveal. It is one each man must learn for himself; for its words have not been coined, so he cannot tell it if he would.

So has religion her secret - it is written large in many a holy book, yet never the tongue which may read it aloud. It is painted in the rainbow and the aurora, but never the artist has lived who could limn it. It sounds in the music of great composers, but never has a harmonist translated it in words formed by the lips.

So religion and Freemasonry alike tell their simple, profound secrets, to all who will learn, by the use of symbols.

Freemasons are bound each to each by the Mystic Tie; define it, explain it, put it into words! It may not be done, for there are no words. Some say it is the Cabletow, confusing the symbol with the thing symbolized. The cabletow is no more the Mystic Tie than the umbilical cord is the mother love. Yet the Mystic Tie is real; brethren braid it in the Lodge, twist its strands together in fellowship, lay cord on cord to form it in pity and charity and relief. The friendly word ties a knot in it; the familiar background of mutually lived Lodge life keeps its end from fraying. Those who meet on the level and part upon the square, who listen together to the old, old words of the old, old ritual, tie it tighter, and tighter about them . . .but cannot tell of it; only feel it, know it, love it. A great Masonic poet wrote:

“What is it in the wild things that calls to little wild things? What secret sacred things do the mountains whisper to the hillmen, so silently yet so surely that they can be heard above the din and clatter of the world? What mystery does the sea tell the sailor, the desert to the Arab, the arctic ice to the explorer, the stars to the astronomer? When we have answered these questions; mayhap we may define the magic of Masonry - who knows what it is, or how, or why, unless it be the long Cabletow of God running from heart to heart?” Religion cannot exist without the human race, since - at least as far as we know - the beast of the field do not worship.

And the contrary is true - the race could not have been, without religion. Wise scientists “prove” that worship of an Unseen Presence is an outgrowth of a primal fear of the unknown causes of natural phenomena; thunder, lightning, earthquake, wind storm, tidal waves and so on. But others as wise point to the instincts through which alone the race has survived and grown - love and protection of the weak, care of the infant, mutual helpfulness, the formation of tribes on the foundation of the greatest good to the greatest number; all of which, during the slow years, have evolved into justice, liberty, unselfishness, courage and the giving spirit.

Even the beasts of the jungle know love of offspring and occasionally the spirit of helping one another; without them, no species could survive.

Religion, then, rests on the certainty that there “is” a meaning to life. Without it, our very existence is chaos. No man is so Godless, no character so vile, but what some within is a consciousness of “meaning.” The completely selfish person who live solely for himself cannot survive. Nor confuse this with that queer doctrine which says that all that is lofty and fine in humanity is but “enlightened selfishness.; that the courageous man who faces death for his friend is doing that which pleases him better than living securely without risk; that he who devotes himself to service to others at personal sacrifice prefers that life, and therefore, but please his own desires; that the missionary who faces torture and death to spread the gospel thinks only that in such a life will he find his greatest joy. For if that doctrine is carried back to the Great Teachers - Jesus and Moses, Confucius and Buddha - it becomes blasphemy.

Religion knows there is meaning to life; Freemasonry is as definite in her dependence upon the rationality of the Universe, the definite justice in which brethren have most faith when understanding it least. Without creed or dogma, Freemasonry is predicated upon an utter belief

that in the universe man has his place, and in the reality of spiritual value. Here Freemasonry and religion are so close they seem to become one. Yet even when two theories of living coalesce there is no proof that one possesses, or is possessed by the other.

Religion should not be required to submit to any process of “proving.” Proofs are for the mind; religious conviction transcends the mind. Proofs are of man; religion in man’s heart is of God.

Proofs are what we see with the eye and touch with the hand; religion’s certainties are not of the earth, earthy.

Theologies and dogmas, rites and churches, creeds and faiths have complicated religion for the common man by a multiplicity of details, a hard and fast hewing to some one line, conceived by some - doubtless human and mistaken - mind. Religion, as distinct from “a” religion or “the” religions, teaches only by the simplest of symbols - so does Freemasonry. The parables of the Carpenter of Nazareth are all concerned with every day things; the symbols of religion - home, fireside, a building, a lost sheep, a father’s love - are simple.

The symbols of Freemasonry which teach the most are the simplest - the square, the compasses, the letter “G, the sprig of Acacia, a Great Light to shine. . .

Tear aside the dark veil that hangs between today and the dim and distant past when men worshipped fire on a pile of stones - a group of half naked men and women and children in solemn procession pass from east to west by way of the south about the godhead burning merrily, casting in the flames the roots which, ignited, give out the sweet odor, laying on the coals what was to become the “burnt offering” of the days of Moses, all with the dim idea of propitiation.

Tear from a “high” church the veil of formality and austere ritualism which enshrouds its truths - a group of men and women kneel humbly to partake of the bread and wine by which they offer contrite hearts to the Unseen Presence.

Finally, tear aside the covering of mystery and ritualistic observance which conceals a Masonic Lodge at labor from a profane world - a group of men who pass from the east to the west by way of the south to gather about an Altar, there to lay their hands and vow themselves to mutual service, offering their gifts to the Great Architect of the Universe in gratitude for the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, and of the old, old Craft. . .

Every brother must decide for himself whether Freemasonry has or has not, is or is not a religion.

But before he decides let him read, in the Great Light of Masonry, Matthew, Chapter XVIII, verse 20.