

Masonry And Religion

by

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Some churches are complaining today that Masonry is not compatible with Christianity. An examination of the evidence suggests that the question should really be, "Is the church compatible with Christianity?" The question, honestly put, does not beg an answer but suggests first that church history is too full of instances of pride, cruelty and violence for the church to cast the first stone. Secondly, it suggests that the present controversy should never be reduced to an attack by the church and a defense by Masonry. When such lines of battle are drawn, the roles expected of both sides may become too understanding.

It must be stated at the outset that no counterattack against Masonry's detractors is intended. Religious bodies tend to be conservative. All bureaucracies, including those of organized religion, tend more to preserve the status quo than either to pursue the goals for which the institution was founded. Religious bodies are no more exempt from this pattern than secular bureaucracies. Therefore, this essay should not be considered as a criticism of the Roman Catholic Church. When there was no competition for the universal Church except handfuls of heretics, there was no need for the church to alter its opinion of itself or its competitors. Dr. James M. Robinson, when at Emory University, said that if the Roman Catholic Church dispersed, one or more of the main line Protestant denominations would rush to fill the need for a conservator of the traditional power and claims of the Church. Some readers may remember instances when a dominant Protestant church overshadowed life and values in its community. Admirers of such churches argued then and argue now that the church's dominance made a better community.

Nor should the conclusion be drawn that the Roman Catholic Church is singled out for anti-Masonic bias. Some American denominations,

such as the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod and Free Methodists, have long-standing anti-Masonic biases. The separation of the Free Methodist Church from the main body of Methodism grew out of the Morgan affair.

We may miss the point of the relationship of "the Church" and Masonry if we limit our examination to these two bodies alone. Should we not be asking how Masonry gets along with everyone else but the Church and how the Church gets along with everyone else but the Masonic Order.

The emergence of Masonry as a world movement came at a bad time for the Roman Catholic Church. In the eighteenth century, when the Premier Grand Lodge was founded and Masonry was spreading like wildfire, the power of the Roman Catholic Church and its political allies was perilously threatened. The Church had long depended upon the power of Spain, with its Catholic Majesties and France, "the eldest daughter of the Church". By 1737, when the Vatican first denounced Freemasonry, Spain had passed her peak. In a few years, France and England would fight a bloody war to determine who would sit on the Spanish throne. France had suffered the first of a series of defeats at the hands of the English. In Scotland, an attempt to seat the Catholic "Old Pretender" (styled James III) on the British throne by force of arms had failed. Even the Holy Roman Empire, a loose confederation of German and Italian states and which has been described by historians as neither holy, Roman or an empire, was decaying and would shortly disintegrate. On all fronts, the Catholic Church was losing ground. It was unbelievable, but the Jesuits were expelled from Spain in the eighteenth century. In France, Gallicanism and Jansenism undermined the power and authority of the Church. Reformed churches had become reasonably secure in Protestant Europe not

many years earlier. Presbyterian order prevailed in Scotland only in 1690. The Thirty Years War between Catholic and Protestant factions of the Holy Roman Empire ended less than a hundred years earlier. Therefore, the Catholic Church and its relationships with individuals and organizations must be seen in the light of world politics. It is therefore not surprising that the expansion of Masonry was seen as a threat by the eighteenth century Catholic Church. A Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted (i.e. operative and speculative) Masons, founded on principles of the brotherhood of man — all men — and the Fatherhood of God introduced a new social element that was an implicit challenge to the supremacy of the Church in social matters. Although early Masonic ritual was explicitly Christian, Masons did not acknowledge the Roman Catholic Church as the only vehicle in which God might move about His earth. The evidence also suggests that Masonry was much more involved in politics in Mediterranean countries than expected or allowed in modern English-speaking Lodges. The use of Masonry as a political force may have been the most objectionable aspect of the relationship between Lodge and Church. The Roman Church had real reasons to fear Masonry in the eighteenth century.

From its beginnings, Roman Catholicism was a politically based church. We are all familiar with the story of Constantine and his battle with Maxentius for control of the Roman Empire. As his Army approached the Milvian Bridge, now in the suburbs of Rome, Constantine saw a cross in the air and heard the motto, "In This Sign Conquer" (In Hoc Signo Vinces). Constantine became a Christian like his mother and organized the Church like the Empire. As there was an Emperor to rule the Empire, so there was a Bishop (the Bishop of Rome) to rule the Church. Consuls and proconsuls ruled the territories into which the Empire was divided, just as Archbishops and bishops ruled the territories of the Church. When Constantine moved his court to Constantinople (Byzantium), the power of the Pope was substantially increased. His authority spilled over into secular politics.

The temporal rulers, both the Emperors that followed Charlemagne and the local feudal giants, held substantial sway over the Church until the time of Pope Gregory VII, a German by the name of Hildebrand, and the "Investiture Controversy." Until then, the general practice was that Bishops would be chosen by local rulers and the Pope notified. Gregory claimed the right to invest Bishops with their "spiritualities and their temporalities." That is, the Pope claimed the right to decide who would represent the Church at York, not merely to agree to empower the representative of the King of England in the Cathedral of York Minster. It was an important counter in the balance of power between Emperor and Pope. Bishops wielded great secular power, not just religious readership. For example, a great portion of the actual land in Medieval London was taken up by politically active Bishops and Abbots. The account books of the Bishop of Ely for the period about 1400 suggest that the expense of running a proper Bishop's seat of power in London cost more than the stipends of the hundred priests who served the parish churches in the City of London. An unneeded portion of the Abbot of Hyde's residence was the Tabard Inn of Canterbury Tales. Bishops and "mitered" abbots sat as the third house of parliament. Even today, they are entitled to a seat in the House of Lords.

Hildebrand was opposed by Henry IV. The most memorable moment in the long battle was after Gregory excommunicated Henry. The latter, dressed in sackcloth and ashes, barefoot in the snow, pleaded for forgiveness before the gates of the papal castle at Canossa. After the death of both of these bullheaded Nordics, the Church gained a modest but exceptionally important victory. The power of the Church continued to grow until 1204, when Pope Innocent III and the Fourth Lateran Council became virtual masters of European politics. Almost exactly a hundred years later, the Church's power had so fallen that the Pope and the curia were virtual prisoners of the King of France and seemed more included to do his will than God's. From 1378, the Church was fractured with Popes claiming loyalty to Avignon, Pisa and Rome. In 1414, the Council

of Constance declared Popes John XXIII (Baldassarro Cossa) and Benedict XIII (Pedro de Luna) deposed and installed Martin V in Rome. The church never fully recovered its political power.

The Supreme Council of the Scottish Rite has provided Masons and the public with the text of the papal letter HUMANUM GENUS of Pope Leo XIII, dated April 20, 1884, which vilifies Masonry and the "Spirit of the Age." Most ages, including our own, earn the condemnation of moralists. We need think little before we produce a long list of ills in our society which demand correction. We can be quite specific. Leo XIII was general, less specific. He makes up, however, what he lacks in specificity about Masonry with expansive claims for the Church. He equates the Kingdom of God on Earth with the Church he heads. Unfortunately, newspapers daily remind us of the failure of a variety of churches and religious leaders of a wide variety of persuasions to come up to the standards of God or even those of their own religious bodies.

Amid vague and unfounded charges, such as doing Satan's work, the real anger of Pope Leo XIII is shown toward the end of the missive. Masons, he declares, seduce people away from their proper rulers and promote usurpers. In a way, familiar to Americans, this charge is true. Certainly Washington, and a host of other organizers and achievers of American independence, were Freemasons. The same was true in Italy. Garibaldi and others were Masons and, in creating a unified Italy from a myriad of tiny kingdoms, duchies and republics, they displaced the Pope as an earthly monarch. The Papal States, once ruled by the Pope, became part of a national Italy.

Unfortunately, the Church failed to appreciate that this divestiture may have been far more beneficial to the Roman Church than maintenance of its temporal establishment. By ridding itself of the political administration of its territories, the care of its frontiers and the wars Cesare Borgia and Pope Julian II seemed to enjoy fighting, the Roman Catholic Church may now devote all its energies and resources to

expressing the love of God which we see in Jesus Christ. In this endeavor, Freemasonry wishes them every success.

Freemasonry has recently come under widespread attack from religious bodies, especially in Great Britain. The Methodist Church there has forbidden use of their facilities for Masonic activities. The Synod of the Church of England has adopted a report critical of Masonry, although a critic recently called the Church of England "a stronghold of Freemasonry for more than 200 years."¹ The Free Church of Scotland condemned the Fraternity, although newspaper accounts of their discussions reported that the speakers said they did not know much about Masonry. The Church of Scotland, which numbers many Masons among its ministers, condemned Masonry at its 1989 General Assembly.

Why have modern churches with histories of benign relationships with Freemasonry suddenly become frightened about the religion and ethics of the Craft?

This recent concern on the part of British churches follows the literary efforts of Stephen Knight. His "Jack the Ripper: The Final Solution", published in 1976,² alleged that the Ripper murders were the result of a monstrous Masonic conspiracy, involving royalty and high level government and police officials. According to Knight, the plot was designed to rescue the Duke of Clarence, oldest son of the Prince of Wales, and second in line to the throne, from an ill-advised, secret marriage to a Catholic girl living in Whitechapel, the sector of the London slums where the murders were committed. The daughter of this marriage, a Roman Catholic, was therefore third in line to the throne. The times were politically unstable, if not outright republican. If the marriage and the birth of the child were to become public knowledge, abundant tinder would be heaped upon the smoldering embers of revolution. The murders, Knight contended, were to silence the women who knew about the marriage.

Knight's attempts to prove that the victims were murdered in strict conformity with Masonic ritual are, at best, silly. His rationale of the mechanics of the murders defies logic. However, the book was scandalous enough to sell well and written well enough to create an air of paranoia with regard to the Craft.

Knight followed the success of "Jack the Ripper: The Final Solution" with "The Brotherhood",³ expanding the attack on Freemasonry on a wide front. He charged that in England Masonry has corrupted law enforcement, the courts of justice, banking, employment practices and social life. These charges have vague references and cannot be verified or refuted. However, in the case of "Operation Countryman," Knight was correct to point out that a series of crimes committed in London between 1971 and 1977 had involved the collaboration of police officials and common criminals, all of whom were Masons. Personal efforts to obtain an official report on "Operation Countryman" from Scotland Yard have met with silence. The Rev. Cyril Barker Cryer, secretary of Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076, advises that no government "white paper" was published.

Knight is particularly severe in the area of religion. He contends that Masonry is nothing short of Devil worship, a religion with its own distinct god, described at times as "The Great Architect of the Universe." It should be noted that the description of God as "The Great Architect of the Universe" is not a Masonic innovation, but is a representation from art of the Church of the Middle Ages.

It is unlikely that the more malignant critics of Freemasonry can ever be satisfied. Trying to cut the cloth of our ancient order to fit their tastes would certainly be a waste of time. On the other hand, we have an obligation to our Craft and to ourselves and to the dignity and demonstrable compatibility of the Craft with Christianity, Judaism and the other great religions of the world to correct those elements which were either ill-considered or which might seem to

dilute our faith or offend the religious sensibilities of members of the Craft.

We should certainly be concerned about the growing number of respected Christian denominations who have, in the wake of Knight's "revelations," adopted condemnations of our Fraternity. Our churches, although they no longer have the influence in society they once enjoyed, are most important in the life and for the family of the sort of man we wish every Mason to be. Every Mason who reads the reports of these concerned denominations, especially when it is his own denomination, if he takes his church and what it does or says seriously, will be moved to judge the validity of the criticisms of the Craft by his church. Each Mason who is a member of a church which denounces the Masonic Order must decide for himself whether or not an association that uniformly preaches friendship, truth, morality and brotherly love and practices those virtues, human nature being what it is, somewhat less uniformly is compatible with the fundamentals of his faith and the claims propounded by his particular denomination. Knight's accusations are highly charged emotionally, and, human nature being what it is, a few Brethren within our ranks will be moved to leave.

As an ordained minister of the United Methodist Church, many of whose Bishops, ministers and other leaders are and have been members of the Craft, I feel that Freemasonry and Christianity are not only compatible, but that Freemasonry provides a practical means of putting into effect many of the great teachings of the Christian faith. I hope that Jewish and Muslim Brothers and those of other faiths feel the same about their religions and Masonic obligations and practices.

Is the criticism of Masonry justified? Have others whose vocation or avocation is religious leadership wondered about the meaning or significance of Masonic ritual and practice? Certainly Methodist, Episcopal and Presbyterian criticism should not be rejected without examination.

Americans and Britons will remember how difficult it was for the thirteen American colonies to obtain a serious and discerning hearing for their criticisms of their relationship to the Mother Country. In the heat of that communications effort, Patrick Henry said, "Caesar had his Brutus, Charles I had his Cromwell, and George III...." When the cries of "Treason" subsided, he continued, "And George III may profit from their example. History also reminds us of the shortsightedness of Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI, as well as the false security of Czar Nicholas II.

No Mason desires a conflict between his Craft and his church or synagogue. However, churches are composed of human beings and have the capacity to be wrong. They frequently exercise that capacity, by engaging in witch hunts, the slaughter of heretics and religious wars, to say nothing of the petty imperfections of individual persons and congregations.

We are, therefore, under no moral or logical compulsion to change anything just because a group of mortals, albeit a church, so decrees. However, we should not hesitate to amend our ritual, our rules or our accustomed practices where such amendment will bring us closer to the principles of Masonry or tend to make instruction in and the practice of Masonry more effective. If the current controversy prompts us to a beneficially critical look at ourselves, our antagonists have done us a great favor. If the questions raised send us back, as Christians, to the Bible and to a study of the theory and practice of our own denominations as well as to examination of our ritual and the assumptions upon which the ritual is built, we will be better Christians as well as better Masons.

What are the specific criticisms churches level against Masonry? The Church of England and the action of its General Synod at York in the summer of 1987 may give us the clearest picture. The report "Freemasonry and Christianity — Are They Compatible?" was published in June. A month later, it was debated and adopted. Chaired by Dr. Margaret Hewitt,

the committee included two Freemasons. Here are their conclusions:

1. Masonic rituals contain elements of worship.
2. Masonry promotes the concept of salvation by works.
3. JAHBULON, "the name or description of God which appears in all the rituals," is blasphemous because it is an amalgam of pagan deities. In effect, use of the term is taking God's name in vain.
4. Christians, who should proclaim the name and nature of God, should not keep such knowledge secret within the lodge.
5. Christians should not swear on the Bible to keep secrets when they do not know what those secrets will be.
6. Underlying these specific objections is the general objection, set forth with vigor by Stephen Knight, that Masonry is a religion.

Three parties in the Church of England, who are usually on terms of virulent confrontation with each other, united to condemn Masonry: Fundamentalists, Feminists and the High Church party.

How do we respond to their criticism? If the Reformation taught us anything, it is that such questions cannot be answered for us by others. We must follow the Holy Spirit as closely as we can, weigh the evidence and do what conscience demands. For example, it is argued that Masonry teaches salvation by works. This phrase invokes a theological struggle that goes back to the Middle Ages. Some church leaders argue that we could not only earn our way into heaven by good works.

Even more interesting was the notion that if some did more than was required, excesses of good works, by saints for example, could be put into a treasury and drawn on by those who needed them. To fabricate an extreme case, Al Capone's family could make arrangements, usually by paying cash, for good deeds to be transferred to his account. Luther read Romans 5 and became convinced that we are saved by

faith in Jesus Christ alone. John Calvin, whose route was more complicated, reached the same conclusion. Other Reformers agreed. Calvin said that the way to salvation is to renounce the Covenant of Works, the idea that we can earn our way into heaven, commit ourselves to Jesus Christ and bring forth fruits worthy of repentance. Good works is an important part of Christian salvation. The Epistle of James points out that "faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by deeds, is dead." Similarly, Revelation says, "The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books [of life]." I explained to a Catholic friend that Masonry simply used ritual to urge men to enjoy the benefits of morality and goodness. At York, the Archbishop of York said, that to use words like "heresy" and "blasphemy" was to judge Freemasonry by inappropriate standards. "I am much more disturbed by prying Christians who want to make everything conform to their own truth than by groups of well-meaning and charitable who enjoy meeting together and dressing up, or down, as the case may be."

Perhaps Masonry has a phrase that describes how we should react to the conflict between Masonry and those churches who have declared their enmity: "Take due notice thereof, and govern yourself accordingly."

Endnotes

¹ Knight, Stephen, *The Brotherhood*, Dorset Press, 1984, p. 240.

² London: Grafton Books.

³ Op. cit.