

The Future of Universal Freemasonry in Society

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So, what is the future of Freemasonry? Where does it go in the future? Should it change or be changed? What challenges does it face? These are all pertinent questions, so let us turn our minds to possible answers. But before we can do that, we need to discover what Freemasonry is, and where it comes from – that may give us some clues.

As to as the origins of Freemasonry, no one knows for sure. There are no extant definite records. But there are several theories. A popular theory is that Freemasonry originated from the guilds of operative stonemasons (known as lodges) which flourished in Europe, and Britain in particular, during the Middle Ages. Stonemasonry was then a most important craft, the manifestation of which can still be seen today in the many cathedrals, churches, castles and manors that survive from those times.

However, operative lodges were somewhat different from the guilds associated with other medieval trades. Stonemasons were itinerant workers who were forced to travel to renew their employment as each building project was completed. The fluid nature of the operative craft, therefore, posed many problems in the determination and recognition of qualifications and skills. In the largely illiterate society that then prevailed, lodges acted as trade regulatory bodies, not only in the area of professional skills and the recognition of practical qualifications, but also in the moral and religious standards of their members. In response to these needs, the operative craft, through its lodges, evolved a system of instruction that combined practical knowledge and morality. The medieval lodge system also, of necessity, involved a degree of privacy and secrecy, so that the supposed skills of a newly-arriving stranger could be readily checked.

The march of technology in building saw the decline of stone construction in the late Middle Ages, and with it the steady demise of the stonemason's craft and the operative lodges. As a reaction to this decline, the passage of time saw increasing numbers of men who were not stonemasons being received into lodges. By the eighteenth century, lodges had largely ceased to be composed of stonemasons. These non-operative members became known as *Speculative* or *Symbolic* Masons. The decline of operative masonry and the rise of the *speculative* kind also heralded the end of the itinerant nature of some lodges. All lodges could now find permanent homes in urban locations. The premier Grand Lodge of England was formed on 24 June 1717 by four London lodges. No records remain of the event.

Our knowledge of this foundation meeting comes largely from Anderson's 1738 edition of the *Constitutions* of the Grand Lodge. According to Anderson, representatives of the four lodges met in 1716 and determined upon a meeting in the following year to revive the Annual Assembly and Feast, at which they would 'chuse a Grand Master from among themselves till they should have the Honour of a Noble Brother at their Head'. The first meeting was duly held and one Anthony Sayer, Gentleman, was elected as the initial Grand Master.

There would seem little doubt, therefore, that the formation of the Grand Lodge was not prompted by a perceived need of central organisation, but simply to enable the London lodges to meet together socially—bearing in mind that members were now largely of the *speculative* kind. The only other discernible reason was a desire to elect a 'noble brother' as their leader with, one suspects, the view of raising the social status of their organisation. Success first occurred in 1721, with the election of John, 2nd Duke of Montagu, as Grand Master. Since then the Grand Lodge of England has continuously had either a Peer of the Realm or Prince of Royal Blood as Grand Master.

It was not until the 1720s that the Grand Lodge commenced its emergence as a regulatory body. In 1723 the first secretary to Grand Lodge was appointed, and regular minutes kept. Grand Lodge started to meet more frequently, and its *Constitutions* were published. The membership of nobles attracted press publicity, and the number of lodges rapidly expanded—not only in England, but overseas as well. An independent Grand Lodge was formed in Ireland in 1725, followed by a counterpart in Scotland in 1736.

The early years of organised English Masonry, however, proved far from harmonious, and the eighteenth century saw six rival Grand Lodges emerging at various times to claim jurisdiction over England or part of it. Only two of these persisted with any substantial following. These were the premier Grand Lodge of England (often referred to as the *Moderns* Grand Lodge, or *Moderns*), and the Grand Lodge of England According to the Old Constitutions (known as the Atholl Grand Lodge, or *Antients*). The *Moderns*, according to their opponents, introduced unacceptable changes into the rituals and practices of Freemasonry.

The *Antients* Grand Lodge, apparently spawned by their opposition to these 'innovations', had emerged by 1751. Irish Masons then living in England who were 'unhappy' with the premier Grand Lodge originally established it. The two Grand Lodges developed quite a number of divergent practices. However, except at official level, ordinary Masons were not particularly interested in this rivalry, and most members on both sides either ignored these divergences or paid little heed to them.

As Freemasonry spread rapidly around the world, the passage of time saw the old discords largely disappear. Newer members on both sides had no understanding of the issues involved, and even less interest in them. The pressure for union increased, and the chance of such an occurrence was greatly enhanced by the election of HRH the Duke of Sussex as Grand Master of the *Moderns*, and his brother HRH the Duke of Kent as Grand Master of the *Antients*. Joint committees of the two Grand Lodges met and overcame remaining problems, and the union was happily effected on 27 December 1813. The title United Grand Lodge of England was adopted, and the Duke of Sussex became its first Grand Master.

The United Grand Lodge of England subsequently developed into the largest Masonic body in the world, having lodges chartered on every continent. English Freemasonry has directly or indirectly been the source of all Grand Lodges elsewhere on the globe. The Grand Lodges of Ireland and Scotland, generally accepted as the second and third Grand Lodges formed, have also chartered lodges all over the world. As Masonry grew in strength in various localities, other Grand Lodges were formed. Most European countries possess a Grand Lodge, as do virtually all the provinces of Canada, and the States of America and Australia. Similarly, most South and Central American countries have at least one Grand Lodge each. Diverse countries such as Israel, South Africa, India, Japan and the Philippines are likewise blessed.

It needs to be appreciated that Freemasonry is not one worldwide confederation. There are more than a hundred independent Masonic Grand Lodges in the world, most of which maintain 'fraternal relations' with each other—diplomatic relations, to put it in non-Masonic terms.

There are also quite a number of differences in the constitutional, operational and ritualistic practices between Grand Lodges, but these are far from major, and under normal circumstances a mason can readily visit other Mason lodges anywhere in the world.

So, that is where Freemasonry has come from, but what is about?

Freemasonry is a moral and ethical education society, and a universal brotherhood. Its primary aim is to teach morality and ethics to its members. One of the best ways to define Freemasonry is to quote from Masonic ritual itself: 'Freemasonry is a peculiar System of Morality veiled in Allegory and illustrated by Symbols'. 'Peculiar' here means 'special' rather than 'strange' or 'unusual'. The idea of teaching through allegories and symbols is not a new one. All great teachers have followed this method. The System of Morality is that which every Freemason is bound to profess and practise. It includes principles with which he was to some extent familiar before his entry into Freemasonry. The new member will, nevertheless, find them presented in new ways and in forms different from those previously encountered. If he finds in Masonic teaching nothing particularly new, he must remember that in some respects at least 'there is nothing new under the sun', and that the essence of morality is to be found in the simplicity of its requirements.

Freemasonry recognises the richness of the cultural beliefs of all men and excludes no individual from membership on the basis of race, religion or politics. In this sense it is a liberal organisation, recognising the value of all men who share a belief in a Supreme Being, the goal of self-improvement, and who work towards the betterment of mankind. A man who becomes a Freemason makes a commitment to strive for excellence in all aspects of daily life.

Three great principles that are the cornerstone of the beliefs of Freemasonry are taught in lodges throughout the world. These are traditionally described as Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth. Freemasons are expected to practice these principles by:

- Showing tolerance and respect for the opinions of others and behaving with kindness and understanding to all people.
- Practicing charity and care for their own and for the community by charitable and voluntary work.
- Striving for achievement of the highest ethical and moral behaviour and spiritual truth.

One of Freemasonry's greatest strengths is it a universal brotherhood. To be a freemason one must believe in a Supreme Being. How each member interprets God is purely a matter for him. Thus, there are thousands of Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists around the world who are Masons, who sit together in lodge in harmony – neither politics or religion can be discussed in a Masonic context. As an example, some years ago I sat in Israel. To my right were several Palestinian Moslems, to my left were several Jews, and the Master of the Lodge was Christian Arab. Outside was a society largely racked by hate and fear, inside the lodge was harmony, brotherly love and peace.

As a furtherance of its teachings, Masonry and Masons are heavily involved around the world in charitable pursuits, in running hospitals, homes for elderly and donating large amounts of money to worthy causes.

So, with this background let us return to our initial questions. What is the future of Freemasonry? In today's ever increasingly complicated and materialistic world, I hold the view that a Society based squarely on morality is more needed than ever before. A case can be argued that Masons have made a huge contribution to civilization over past centuries. Do not forget it was mostly Masons who wrote the American Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution, to give but one example.

So, should Freemasonry change? Why should it! It has stood the test of time. It still remains the largest non-political, non-religious organization in the world. Certainly, its teachings are as relevant today as in the past; probably more so. Should we become less moral, just because society has? I think not. Yes, it faces some challenges. We are attacked by various religions on occasions, quite unfairly as Freemasonry is neither a religion nor a substitute for religion. But we have been attacked by religions for over 300 years. Nothing knew about that. Certainly there is a worldwide trend in modern times for Masonry to focus on community relations, to explain its ethics to the wider community. And so it should, it is a part of wider society.

Masonry does face the ongoing challenge of declining membership in some parts of the world – certainly in North America. But so do many other worthy organizations in civil society, such as Rotary, Lions, and of course, many churches. The pattern of people disengaging from community organizations has been ongoing for perhaps the last forty years. There is much research to suggest that various changes in modern society are the cause. Frankly, falling membership does not worry me – to me the focus must be, as it always has been, on the quality rather the quantity of members. And many men still continue to join Freemasonry, we are in no danger of dying out, rest assured.

In conclusion, let me state that I have been fortunate enough to visit Masonic lodges all over the world, and I never ceased to be amazed at the friendship I receive wherever I go. Freemasonry is the only social organization in the world, where one can walk into a room of complete strangers, anywhere in the world, and be immediately welcomed as close friend and brother. And that will not change.