

A RESPONSE TO CRITICS OF FREEMASONRY

From Northern Ireland to Iran, from the Middle East to the United States, religious extremism is a growing force throughout the world. Jarred by the rapid pace of social and cultural change, especially the apparent disintegration of moral values and the breakup of the family, some people with this movement have sought refuge from the complexity of modern life by embracing absolute views and rejecting tolerance of other beliefs.

Simple, easy, seemingly stable answers bring comfort in a rapidly changing world. For example, some churches have responded to the personal anguish of their members by circling the wagons, that is. By strictly defining theological concepts and insisting their members "purify" their fellowship by renouncing and other beliefs.

The next step already taken by various churches is to yield degrees of control within their ranks to vocal factions espousing extremist views. These splinter groups focus the congregation's generalized anxieties on specific targets. The proffered cure-all is to destroy the supposed enemy. Freemasonry has become one of these targets precisely because it encourages members to form their own opinion on many important topics, including religion.

Thus some churches have expressed concerns, even condemnations, of Freemasonry. Generally, these actions are based on misunderstandings. A case in point is the June 1993 report to the Southern Baptist Convention by the Convention's Home Mission Board. This report defined eight alleged conflicts between the tenets and teachings of the Masonic Fraternity and Southern Baptist theology. Let's briefly look at those areas, as representative of the thinking of some well-meaning but misinformed church members today, and see if the concerns are real or simply a matter of misinformation or misunderstanding.

Most of the issues really deal with language in one way or another. Almost every organization has a special vocabulary of words which are understood by the group. It's hardly appropriate for someone outside a group, and without the special knowledge of the group, to object to the terms unless he or she fully understands them and why they are used. If someone wants to read the Journal of the American Medical Association for example, that is his right---but he doesn't have a right to complain the articles use medical terms. A person reading a cookbook had better know terms like fold, cream the butter, or soft ball have special meanings--or he'll make a mess instead of a cake. The same is true of a non-Mason reading Masonic materials. As to the critique of Freemasonry by the Southern Baptist Convention (which, incidentally, had several positive things to say about Freemasonry), here is a brief explanatory discussion of each point.

1. Because they do not see specific words in their historic context, some critics complain of the prevalent use in Masonry of offensive titles and terms such as Worshipful Master for the leader of a Lodge. The leader of a Masonic Lodge is called the Master of the Lodge for the same reason the head of a Boy Scout troop is called a Scoutmaster. An orchestra's leader is termed the Concert Master, or a highly-skilled electrician is called a Master Electrician. The term arose in the guilds of the Middle Ages when the most skillful workman - as called the Master. Much Masonic vocabulary dates from that period. Worshipful in Worshipful Master has nothing to do with worship in any religious sense. Masonically. Worshipful is a term of honor and, in this sense. it is a term still used in England and Canada today-- to refer to such officials as mayors of cities. Worshipful John Doe means exactly the same thing as the Honorable John Doe. In the same vein, the Mayor of London is addressed as the Worshipful Lord Mayor. Certainly there is nothing irreligious here in the use of Worshipful or Lord. Such terms are a matter of history and tradition, not religion.

2. Some critics of Freemasonry object to what they term archaic and offensive rituals or so-called bloody oaths in Masonry. There is nothing offensive in the rituals to anyone who understands them. They are ancient, not archaic; since many of them are so old their origins are lost in history. But there is nothing bad in that. The Declaration of Independence is about the same age as the Master Mason Degree, but few complain it is "archaic."

The alleged bloody oaths refer to the penalties associated with the Masonic obligations. They originated in the medieval legal system of England and were actual punishments inflicted by the state on persons convicted of opposing political or religious tyranny. Masonry's obligations do not contain any promise ever to inflict any of the penalties or to participate in the execution of them. In Masonry, they are entirely symbolic and refer exclusively to the shame a good man should feel at the thought he had broken a promise.

3. Certain critics claim the recommended readings for the Degrees of Masonry are "pagan" in origin. "Pagan", as they are using the term, simply means "pre-Christian." The major purpose of Masonry is the study of man's intellectual and moral history for the purpose of developing ourselves morally and intellectually. Such a study has to start with the concepts of man and God as held by early cultures and evidenced in their mythologies. The Greeks and Romans, as well as earlier peoples, had much of importance to say, on many topics, including religion. The idea that a physician must act in the best interests of his patient comes from the pagan Hippocrates; and the concept that the Government cannot break into your house and take what it wants on a whim comes from the pagan Aristotle. None of us would want to live in a world without these ideas.

In almost every field - Law, government, music, philosophy, mathematics, etc. --it is necessary to review the work of early writers and thinkers. Masonry is no exception. But to study the work of ancient cultures is not the same thing as to do what they did or believe what they believed. And no Mason is ever told what he should believe in matters of faith. That is not the task of a fraternity, or a public library, or the government. That is the duty of a person's revealed religion, and is appropriately expressed through his or her church.

4. Ironically, some people complain about the Bible used in Lodge being referred to as the "furniture" of the Lodge. No disrespect is intended. Indeed, just the opposite is true. Masons use the word "furniture" in its original meaning of essential equipment. Since no Lodge can meet without an open Volume of the Sacred Law, (Which in North America is almost always the Bible) the Bible is essential and given a special place of honor as the "furniture" for every regular Lodge.

5. The Masonic use of the term "light" is often misunderstood by non-Masons. This confusion may lead some to think Masons are speaking of salvation rather than knowledge or truth. Nowhere in Masonic ritual, is "light" implied to mean anything other than knowledge. Light was a symbol of knowledge long before it was a symbol of salvation. The lamp of learning appears on almost every graduation card and college diploma. Masonry uses Light as a symbol of the search for truth and knowledge. It's very unlikely that any Mason would think that Light represents salvation.

6. Masonry does not imply salvation may be attained by one's good works. Masonry does not teach any path to salvation. That is the duty of a Church, not a Fraternity. The closest Masonry comes to this issue is to point to the open Bible, and tell the Mason to search there for the path to eternal life. Masonry does believe in the importance of good works, but as a matter of gratitude to God for His many great gifts and as a matter of individual moral and social responsibility. The path to salvation is found in each Mason's house of worship, not in his Lodge.

7. Various critics accuse Masonic writers of teaching the "heresy of universalism." Universalism is the doctrine that all men and women are ultimately saved. Masonry does not teach universalism or any other doctrine of salvation. Again, that's the province of the church, not a fraternity. You have to look rather hard to find Masonic writers who "teach universalism." Even if you could find one, it's important to remember that any Masonic author writes for himself alone, not as an official of the Fraternity. Masonry simply does not have a position, official or otherwise on salvation. Since men of all faiths are welcome in the Fraternity, Masons are careful not to offend the faith of any. Possibly this in itself may seem to be universalism to some critics. Masons call it common courtesy.

8. Some critics, less eager to put their own houses in order than to find fault with others, contend most Lodges refuse to admit African Americans as members. Masonry today is not a white's only organization as the hundreds of thousands of Black, Native American, Hispanic, and Oriental Masons can testify. Petitions for membership do not ask the race of the petitioner, and it would be considered completely wrong to do so. At the same time it must be said that Freemasonry, like American society and churches in general, has not lived up entirely to its high ideal of brotherhood in dealing with African-American and other minorities. This is a situation which most Freemasons, like most Americans, are trying to overcome. There is a schism in Freemasonry dating back over 200 years to when *Prince Hall" Masons, who are African- Americans, declared themselves independent. This schism is similar to the division of the United Methodist Church from the A.M.E. C.M.E. and United Methodist Church from the A.M.E., S.M.E. and A.M.E. Zion churches or the National Baptists from the American and Southern Baptists.

In each of these three examples, the organizations are working to repair the damages of centuries of segregation. For each, complete reunification remains an elusive goal hindered by social resistance on both sides, but not by organizational ideals. In the case of Freemasonry mutual recognition between *"black" and "white" Grand Lodges has proceeded at a steady pace for nearly ten years, while African-American members are increasingly common in formerly "white" Lodges.

For instance, at the international celebration of the 275th anniversary of the Grand Lodge of England in 1992 (the most recent Masonic gathering of about the same size as the Southern Baptist Convention), there were far more Blacks present than there were at the Southern Baptist Convention in Houston in 1993. Freemasonry's movement regarding racial matters affirms Masonry's genuine evolution with the rest of American society and churches toward genuine brotherhood among all races.

In summary, looking over the concerns raised in the report none, are tenets and teachings as the report claims. Four of the concerns are merely misunderstandings of Masonic vocabulary by non-Masons. The complaint that some of the writers whose work Masonry studies are pre-Christian, could be raised against any study of man. Government or philosophy, almost all areas of study start with the ancient (pagan) Greeks. All members of the Fraternity know that Masonry does not invade the area of the Church to teach any doctrine of salvation. Neither universalism, salvation by works, nor any other. And the objection that Masonry is some sort of whites only club is refuted by the myriad of nonwhites wearing the Square and Compasses.

Freemasonry is simply a Fraternity--an organization of men, banded together to further develop themselves ethically and morally, and to benefit the community at large!