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RELIGION, FREEMASONRY, AND FAITH

Reverend Terry L. Tilton, PGM-MN, FPS, HMRMS, Keynote at the William O. Ware Lodge of Research Annual Festive Board, Covington, Kentucky, November 6, 2024

Thank you for the gracious invitation to share this paper, which offers a unique perspective on the relationship between religion, Freemasonry, and faith. This is the second section of a presentation I started five weeks ago at the Rubicon Society Festive Board in Lexington, Kentucky. That paper was titled “Religion, Freemasonry, and Scripture: The Pivotal Moments in our History.” We now turn to the added question of how faith fits into Freemasonry as a religious element of our fraternity.

If understanding the relationship between religion and Freemasonry is complex, then sharing the significance of faith as a vital element of religious belief adds even more difficulty. We must begin by acknowledging that, as Masons, we are bound to a historical understanding of our principles, which can be traced back to the Constitution adopted by the Premier Grand Lodge of England in 1723. This historical context is crucial in understanding the element of faith in Freemasonry. Of course, I am talking about the universal tradition of not allowing political or religious discussion in the lodge, which is a core principle for maintaining

harmony in the lodge. It is referenced as “unmasonic conduct” in the By-laws of many Grand Lodges, like yours in Kentucky¹ and mine in Minnesota.²³

Have you ever considered how your faith is related to Freemasonry? Was it something that you brought with you or something you learned? Has Freemasonry helped you grow your faith? Our personal experiences are crucial in understanding the role of faith in Freemasonry. I am reminded of my neighbor in northern Minnesota, who had a growing experience of his faith

Eino, a Finn from Cook County in northern Minnesota, was an older, single gentleman born and raised a Lutheran. Each Friday night after work, he would fire up his outdoor grill and cook a venison steak.

Now, all of Eino’s neighbors were Catholic...and since it was Lent, they were forbidden from eating meat on Fridays. The delicious aroma from the grilled venison steaks was causing such a problem for the Catholic faithful that they finally talked to their priest. The priest came to visit Eino and suggested that Eino convert to Catholicism. After several classes and much study, Eino attended Mass...and as the priest sprinkled holy water over Eino, he said, **“You were born a Lutheran and raised a Lutheran, but now you are Catholic.”**

Eino’s neighbors were greatly relieved until Friday night arrived when the wonderful aroma of grilled venison filled the neighborhood. The neighbors called

¹ **BOOK OF CONSTITUTIONS OF The Grand Lodge of Kentucky FREE AND ACCEPTED MASONS**, Twelfth Edition, 69.

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41. Masonry is Non-Sectarian, Non-Political, and must remain so.

The avoidance of political subjects in the lodge room is a cardinal principle of Masonry, and a Mason must not use his lodge connection to further his political ambition. We are taught, among the first lessons in Masonry, that it unites, upon the principle of brotherly love, men of every country, sect, and opinion. Our ancient brethren wisely determined that no political or religious distinctions should ever limit its charity. It is peculiar to no country but common to all. It recognizes no religion but that unaltered trust in God, who created the world and all things therein—The Grand Architect of the Universe—by whose unerring square the blocks we offer must at last be tried, and who will reward us according to our merits.

² Section G.6.06 (H) Unmasonic Conduct, Masonic Code of the Grand Lodge of Minnesota, 34

³ Article IV Masonic Information, Section S4.01, Freemasonry and Religion, Basic Principles, Masonic Code of the Grand Lodge of Minnesota, 65.

the priest immediately, and as he rushed into Eino's yard, clutching a rosary and prepared to scold Eino, he stopped in amazement and watched.....

There stood Eino, clutching a small bottle of water, which he carefully sprinkled over the grilled meat, and chanting: **“You were born a deer and raised a deer, but now you are a trout”**

Religion, Freemasonry, and Scripture

A few weeks ago, I delivered a paper to the Rubicon Society's Annual Festive Board exploring whether Freemasonry can be considered a religion or essentially religious. This debate has persisted for over three centuries, with various religious denominations at different times—including Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, and others—accusing Freemasonry of impersonating religion. I cited several influential Masonic figures, suggesting that while Freemasonry encompasses religious values, symbols, and even practices like prayer and Scripture reading, it lacks the dogmatic beliefs and means of salvation in sacraments typical of organized religions. Celebrated masonic voices like Albert Pike, Albert Mackey, and Joseph Fort Newton emphasize that Freemasonry advocates a universal morality and theistic philosophy that transcends specific creeds but does not demand uniform religious adherence from its members. An example is what the reverend and doctor Joseph Fort Newton wrote, **“...Masonry is not a religion but Religion-not a church but a worship, in which all men of all religions may unite unless they insist that all who worship with them must**

think exactly and in detail as they think about all things in the heaven above and in the earth beneath.”⁴ In his *Kentucky Monitor*, Brother Henry Pirtle would say more succinctly, **“Masonry is a religious institution.”**⁵

Why, we might ask, is there such a fascination with the history of our Craft and esoteric studies? It can be argued that Freemasonry shares many characteristics with ancient mystery religions. Historical practices in Freemasonry echo the structure and symbolism seen in the rituals of mystery religions, such as initiation rites, obligation to secrecy, and the fostering of social bonds. Moreover, Freemasonry incorporates myths of spiritual transformation with symbols rooted in religious traditions of death, rebirth, and eternal life. Although most Christians do not know it, Christianity emerged from this mystery tradition. Therefore, to understand Freemasonry, one must recognize that it draws from esoteric traditions across different eras and belief systems. Freemasonry, like Christianity, stands in a long line of mystery traditions having many common religious elements.

Pivotal Historical Moments in Masonic Ritual Formation

Studying our history, we find that to understand Freemasonry’s rituals, we must also remember they developed from their operative origins, with early documents like the Regius Poem (1390) and the Cooke Manuscript (1410) laying the groundwork for speculative Masonic practices. In the 18th century, Freemasonry began diverging from its Christian roots, embracing Enlightenment values emphasizing rationality and religious tolerance. The formation of the first Grand Lodge in 1717 marked a shift away from exclusively Christian influences, allowing members of various faiths to join and removing overt theological

⁴ Joseph Fort Newton, *The Religion of Masonry*, Southeran Publishers Inc., Kingsport, TN, 1927, 11.

⁵ Henry Pirtle, *Kentucky Monitor*, 10th Edition, 1921.

discussions from Lodge activities. The introduction of the third degree in Masonry in 1725 and the addition of symbolic legends, such as the story of Hiram Abiff, further established Freemasonry's unique identity as a fraternity steeped in ritual and symbolic instruction rather than theology.

Religious Philosophy: Rational Theism in Freemasonry

In that first paper, I advocated that 'rational theism' be used to describe Freemasonry's religious philosophy, distinct from orthodox Christianity or the prevailing natural religious philosophy known as Deism. Enlightenment Deism posited a detached Creator no longer interested in his creation. Rational theism, on the other hand, allows for a personal relationship with God, demonstrated by the tradition of opening and closing masonic meetings with prayer. As importantly, masonic teachings prioritize universal spiritual and ethical principles, the immortality of the soul, and moral accountability, underscoring a commitment to spiritual development without imposing specific religious doctrines on its members. In his book *Sacred Secrets: Freemasonry, the Bible, and Christian Faith*, Mike Neville says plainly, **“Freemasonry is not a religion; it is simply based on religion.”**⁶ Our Craft's most noble purpose is fostering spiritual growth. Freemasonry is designed to inspire and motivate us in our journey of finding meaning and fulfillment in this life.

The Use of Scripture and Symbolism in Ritual

Following this logic, it is understandable that Freemasonry would also liberally use Biblical references and symbols, which feature prominently in its degrees and lectures. Neville cites more than 90 Biblical references in the rituals and lectures of the first three Craft degrees. In North America, with the propagation

⁶ Mike Neville, *Sacred Secrets: Freemasonry, The Bible and the Christian Faith*, The history Press, Cheltenham, England, 2012, 358.

of the Preston-Webb work, passages from Psalm 133, Amos 7:7-8, and Ecclesiastes 12:1-7 became integral to the three degrees of Masonic ritual. These scriptures reflect core Masonic values such as brotherhood, moral uprightness, and life's inevitable progression toward death. Each passage reinforces Masonry's moral and spiritual objectives: Psalm 133 celebrates unity, Amos emphasizes moral integrity, and Ecclesiastes reflects on life's fleeting nature and the importance of virtuous living. Although historically, the Masonic ritual incorporates basically Christian and Jewish symbols, it remains flexible, allowing individuals to interpret these elements according to their personal beliefs.

In concluding that first paper, I affirmed Freemasonry's commitment to fundamental principles such as the belief in a Supreme Being, the immortality of the soul, and the pursuit of moral and ethical conduct. These are all religious principles, and if rightly understood, they are why Freemasonry has been called the **"handmaiden of religion."**⁷ Freemasonry cultivates a standard of morality independent of specific dogmatic beliefs. Therefore, the genius of our fraternity is to unite men of diverse religious backgrounds into a band of brothers and friends who can live in harmony under the Fatherhood of God.

The Issue of Faith

Let us turn now to the deeper issue of faith or belief in Freemasonry. The Grand Lodge of California has a compelling introduction to this issue, stating:

“The topic of religion in Freemasonry is a coin with two sides: On one, open acceptance of differences in worship; on the other, faith-based

⁷George Oliver, *The Historical Landmarks and Other Evidence of Freemasonry, Explained*, Vol. 2 of 2 (Classic Reprint) Paperback, Forgotten Books, August 24, 2018.

See Also:

"The definitions of Freemasonry," says Oliver, in his historical Landmarks of Freemasonry, "have been numerous; but they all unite in declaring it to be a system of morality, by the practice of which its members may advance their spiritual interest, and mount by the theological ladder from the Lodge on earth to the Lodge in heaven. It is a mistake, however, to suppose that Freemasonry is a system of religion. It is but the handmaiden to religion, although it largely and effectually illustrates one great branch of it, which is practice."

membership requirements and rituals. Controversial questions emerge in trying to reconcile this yin and yang – the pushing out of religious differences alongside the pulling in of so many faith elements. This much is certain: Without its policy of religious tolerance, Freemasonry could not have succeeded in creating a new social space. Without its grounding in faith, it would be a different organization altogether”.⁸

“Without its grounding in faith, it would be a different organization altogether.” How is that true? What is faith, my brothers? The Apostle Paul gave us a definition of faith that perhaps many of us remember learning. From Hebrews 11:1 (ESV), he said, *“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”*⁹ The reality is that Freemasonry begins with the premise that a person without some spiritual grounding in faith or belief cannot be a member of our fraternity. Twelve times in the ritual and lectures of our degrees, we reference the importance of faith, four times belief, ten times trust, and hope is spoken of 13 times. There can be little doubt that these spiritual virtues are important to Masonry.

If faith grounds Freemasonry’s journey of meaning and purpose, it starts for the candidate when he can answer affirmatively the first question on the lodge petition:

1. Do you have a sincere belief and trust in God?¹⁰

⁸ <https://californiafreemason.org/2023/02/08/religion/> (Accessed November 02, 2024)

⁹ English Standard Version, Hebrews 11:1, Crossway, 2001.

¹⁰ <http://masonlodgestpeter.org/petition.pdf> (Accessed November 3, 2024)

Freemasonry accepts no one knowingly who is an atheist or non-believer in Deity: that is, in Someone or some Higher Power greater than themselves.¹¹¹² How that faith is understood through belief in religious doctrine, practice, or worship will not be questioned. This foundation, along with demonstrated moral uprightness and repute, as reported by a Committee on Investigation and accepted by unanimous vote of the lodge, becomes the necessary and most vital element of allowing a candidate to go through our degrees.

It is not surprising, then, that the candidate for Freemasonry, upon entering the lodge for the first time during the Entered Apprentice Degree, is required to kneel and begin his Masonic journey by being prayed for to dedicate his life to the service of God as is revealed to him, and the support of his brothers. This, we expect, is done by learning the principal tenets of the Craft, which are brotherly love, relief, and truth. You will recall that the candidate will be asked to publicly affirm his belief in God before the lodge brothers.¹³ The Master follows by saying, **“Your trust being in God, your faith is well founded. I take you by the right hand. Arise! Follow your guide and fear no danger.”**¹⁴ He sends him on the first of three parts of a symbolic journey about the altar, walking on the Mosaic pavement of checkered squares and stopping at the stations of the three principal officers.

Think about that ritual, my brothers. What is its purpose? Is it not a journey of faith with many symbols employed to inculcate its meaning? Like every poor

¹¹ **Higher Power** is a term used in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and other twelve-step programs. The same groups use the phrases "a power greater than ourselves" and "God of our understanding" synonymously. The term is intentionally vague because the program is not tied to a particular religion or spiritual tradition; members may use it to refer to any supreme being or deity, another conception of God,.....[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Higher_Power#:~:text=Higher%20Power%20\(HP\)%20is%20a,God%20of%20our%20understanding%22%20synonymously](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Higher_Power#:~:text=Higher%20Power%20(HP)%20is%20a,God%20of%20our%20understanding%22%20synonymously) (Accessed November 3, 2024)

¹² In many Grand Lodge jurisdictions, there is a requirement to believe in monotheism.

¹³ Ritual of the Entered Apprentice Degree, Grand Lodge of Minnesota, A.F. & A.M. "I was asked in whom I put my trust, because, agreeable to an ancient Masonic custom, no atheist could be made a Mason; it was therefore, necessary that I should profess my belief in Deity, otherwise no obligation would be binding upon me."

¹⁴ Ritual of the Entered Apprentice Degree, Grand Lodge of Minnesota, A.F. & A.M.

blind candidate, each of us goes through life symbolically blindfolded, needing to trust a guide as we walk on the checkered pavement of lights and darks that represent the joys and sorrows of this life. In Freemasonry, the Senior Deacon is the candidate's guide, just as he was ours. He represents the support and aid Freemasonry gives to each of its votaries as they travel through the ages and stages of life through our degrees. That they circumambulate about the altar is intentional. As men and Masons, we recognize that you cannot go through life successfully without faith in God. The altar holds the three Great Lights of Masonry, the Holy Bible or Volume of Sacred Law, Square, and Compass. Historically, in Masonry's development, the Volume of Sacred Law was for Christians the Old and New Testaments. For those of other religions, it is the Tanakh, Veda, Koran, or Bhagavad Gita. From its center, it spreads Light, with the ethical symbols of the square and compass spread upon its pages; they represent our highest duty to God, our neighbors, and ourselves.

As the candidate comes to each station, he is examined, all while a Scripture verse enumerating the principal teaching of the degree is read. This is intentional. For all light, all true wisdom comes from Holy Scripture, as is revealed in the words of God. Psalm 133:1 is used in the first degree – **“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell in unity!”** and reminds us of the first principle of fraternity: harmonious brotherhood. In the second degree, from Amos 7:7 – **“Thus he showed me: and behold, the Lord stood upon a wall made by a plumbline, with a plumbline in his hand,”** – reminds us of the need for righteousness in our character and ethical actions in our conduct. And in the third degree from Ecclesiastes 12:1 -- **“Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them;”** – symbolically pointing to the brevity of life

and the necessity to crowd lasting accomplishment into it while we are given breath.

Let me pose another question: Must we have faith to be in Freemasonry, or can we simply belong to find faith? As we all know, a candidate must show some evidence of faith before he can begin his Masonic journey. I would argue that this is only to prove his spiritual nature so that Freemasonry can build upon it. Is it the intent of Freemasonry to erect a temple of faith in each Mason? Certainly, it is. It is the only way we are made better men and Brothers.

For a spiritual man, faith is the foundation of his beliefs and actions. Freemasonry teaches you to love God and to love your neighbor. Though not a religion, we are a place where moral and ethical principles are encouraged and practiced. Where we learn to honor God by caring for our brothers, their widows, wives, and orphans. In other words, where we understand how to “unite in the grand design of being happy and communicating happiness.”¹⁵ At its heart, this is a spiritual endeavor, a faith-based participation in the secret knowledge that we are uniting in the Grand Design.

I am reminded of this principle when hearing these quotes from great religious leaders about faith:

“Faith grows when it is lived and shaped by love.” - Pope Francis¹⁶

***“You will not complete your faith until you love one another.” --
Muhammad***

“Faith is not the clinging to a shrine but an endless pilgrimage of the heart.” – Abraham Josuah Heshel, American rabbi.i

¹⁵ Minnesota Masonic Manual, 2023, Grand Lodge of Minnesota, 74.

¹⁶ Homily for the concluding mass for the World Meeting of Families, 2018.

New Opportunities with Younger Generations

This suggests some interesting studies by the Pew Research Center, which I believe have hopeful implications for the future of our Craft. We all recognize that organized religion across all denominations has been declining. We also know that younger generations are less likely to affiliate with the church or organized religion. For example, 25% of adults under 30 are unaffiliated, compared to 10% or less of those 60 and older. Not surprisingly, younger people are less likely to attend religious services, participate in religious education, or engage in other religious practices. Less than half of millennials, those 28-43 years old, and Gen Zers, those 12-27 years old, attend church regularly, compared with 57% of baby boomers ages 60-78 born.¹⁷¹⁸

But here is a surprising fact: Although younger generations are less religious than older generations, they are just as likely to engage in spiritual practices as older generations. For example, 46% of millennials say they feel a deep sense of wonder about the universe at least once each week. Beliefs about life after death and the existence of heaven, hell, and miracles closely resemble those of older people. Pew Research records that 83% of all U.S. adults believe people have a soul or spirit in addition to their physical body. And 81% of U.S. adults say there is something spiritual beyond the natural world. The top three answers to the question "What does spirituality mean to you?" were "being connected with something

¹⁷https://www.google.com/search?q=Pew+Research+on+spirituality+and+younger+generations&sca_esv=dd2b7979d27b6091&sxsrf=ADLYWIJv5bjdigmfOy7-MgRcnH06Ishymg%3A1730591953216&ei=0bwmZ5rsDN2GptQPpyoby2QY&ved=0ahUKEwjamp207b6JAxVdg4kEHUqDPGsQ4dUDCA8&uact=5&oq=Pew+Research+on+spirituality+and+younger+generations&gs_l=egxnd3Mtd2I6LXNlcnAiNFBldyBSZXNIYXJjaCBvbiBzcGlyaXR1YWxpdkgkYW5kIHlvdW5nZXIgd2VuzXJhdGlvbnMyBRAhGKABMgUQIRigATIFECEYoAEyBRAhGKABMgUQIRigATIFECEYqwJlzXBQIRJYs29wAXgBkAEAmAGBAaABgDWqAQU0My4yN7gBA8gBAPgBAZgCLKACnyPCAgOQABiwAxjWBBhHwglHECEYoAEYCsiCBRAhGJ8FwglIEECMYJ8ICCxAAAGIAEGJECGloFwglIEAAAYgATCAgoQABiABBgUGlcCwglGEEAAYFhgewglIEAAAYFhgeGA_CAgSQAABiABBIGAxikBclCCBAAGIAEGKIEmAMA4gMFEgExIECIBgGQBgaSBwUxNy4yN6AHpJ0D&scient=gws-wiz-serp (Accessed November 2, 2024)

¹⁸ Ref. Generational Age Groupings: Gen Z – (born 1997-2012), Millennials – (born 1981-1996), Generation X – (born- 1965 – 1980), Boomers – (born 1946-1964)

bigger than myself" (74%), "being connected with God" (70%), and "being connected with my true self" (64%).¹⁹

Is it not the mission of Freemasonry to foster spirituality, to help you connect with something bigger than yourself, and to discover the meaning and purpose of your life made by God? Is Freemasonry not uniquely suited to reaching these younger generations? Would they become interested in our work if they knew more about us?

Our members are encouraged to seek and develop their spiritual lives through a proven system of enlightenment and learning. We offer no religious dogmas, doctrines, or rituals necessary for salvation. Yet, we unite in spirituality with prayers to God, always to the end that no one is excluded. We dedicate our lives to improving society through acts of service and self-improvement, another core value of younger generations seeking meaning and purpose in their lives.

I am convinced that for a certain percentage of younger generations, Freemasonry could be a place of social bonding, caring, service, and connection to God and others that they desperately seek. I have already seen it happen with nearly a dozen new members in my lodge who come from the Millennial and Gen Z age groups. Almost to a man, they have rejected participation in formalized religion, and Freemasonry cannot give that to them. But they are looking for opportunities to grow and discover self-respect and purpose, which we can give them. We can encourage them to continue their spiritual formation based on universal principles of love for God and love for our fellow man. We can provide a safe place for them to explore questions of faith and meaning in their lives.

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The late Dr. Howard Thurman, minister and professor of theology, once wrote: **“In as much as everybody is going to live until he dies, it is but the higher aspect of wisdom to put as much thoughtfulness into the meaning of one’s life as one is capable of finding or generating.”**²⁰ I read this quote and thought, "Is this not the purpose of Freemasonry? Is this not what Freemasonry has given to each of us?"

Albert Mackey puts it differently: **“Freemasonry is a science of symbols, in which, by their proper study, a search is instituted after truth, that truth consisting in the knowledge of the divine and human nature of God and the human Soul.”**²¹

So, in whom do you put your trust? For Freemasons, if you trust in God, your faith is well-founded, and you have a firm foundation to build your spiritual temple, a dwelling place not made with hands eternal in the heavens. This has always been the secret of our Craft.

I close with a beautiful charge to the newly entered apprentice of Freemasonry’s mission to make men of faith and personal integrity. Henry Pirtle wrote it and perhaps you remember it being read to you many years ago.

“The rites and ceremonies of Freemasonry are essential to its existence—they form the outworks whereby its treasures are, as they ought to be, guarded from the unworthy, and therefore cannot under any circumstances be dispensed with; but true Masonry exists in the heart, and is composed of brotherly love, relief and truth, and that heavenly consummation of all virtues, charity, so beautifully explained in the volume of the sacred law as

²⁰ Unpublished sermon, **Howard Thurman Papers Project**, Boston MA, Boston University-Marsh Chapel, September 26, 1954.

²¹ Albert G. Mackey, M.D., **The Symbolism of Freemasonry: Illustrating and Explaining Its Science and Philosophy, Its Legends, Myths, and Symbols**, 1882.

“bearing all things, hoping all things, believing all things, enduring all things, and thinking no evil,” and it is to the practice of this virtue that your Masonic efforts should ever tend, not only in its common acceptance of pecuniary relief, but as embracing true brotherly love to the full extent inculcated in the sacred writings. Initiation alone never did, nor never can, make a man a true Mason; it gives the key, but the mere possession of the key does not constitute ownership of the treasure; it sows the seed, but unless the soil be good and carefully cultivated, fruit will not be produced; it opens the portal, but unless the road be traversed the goal cannot be attained; it lays the foundation, but without the labor the superstructure cannot be raised. So this evening we have given you the key, we have sown the seed, opened the portal, and laid the foundation; it is for you, with such assistance, as amongst Masons can always be obtained by seeking for it in the proper quarter, to complete the work, and I sincerely trust that in this you will not be found wanting.”²²

Once again, thank you, my brothers, for the opportunity to share with you my study of Freemasonry’s unique religious foundation always begun in faith and discovered in personal spiritual growth and enlightenment through the bonds of our brotherhood.

In fraternitate et caritate,

Reverend Terry L. Tilton, PGM-MN, FPS

²² Henry Pirtle, *New Kentucky Monitor (Revised)*, An Address To A Newly Initiated Brother, The Standard Printing Company Incorporated, Louisville, Kentucky, 1921, 65.