

## The Freemasons

According to the web site of the Grand Lodge of Scotland, Freemasonry is a society of men concerned with moral and spiritual values. Members are taught its precepts by a series of ritual dramas, which follow ancient forms, and use stonemasons' customs and tools as allegorical guides. One of the world's oldest secular fraternal societies, it arose from obscure origins in the late 16<sup>th</sup> to early 17<sup>th</sup> century. World membership is estimated at around five million, including 480,000 in England, Scotland and Ireland.

The essential qualification for admission into membership is belief in a Supreme Being. Membership is open to men of any race or religion who can fulfil this essential qualification and who are of good repute. Freemasonry is not a religion, nor is it a substitute for religion. It expects and encourages members to continue to follow their own faith but it is not permitted for Freemasons to discuss these subjects at Masonic meetings.

Freemasons follow three principles:

- **Brotherly Love:** every true Freemason will show tolerance and respect for the opinions of others and behave with kindness and understanding to his fellow creatures.
- **Relief:** Freemasons are taught to practise charity and to care, not only for their own, but also for the community as a whole, by charitable giving, and by voluntary efforts.
- **Truth:** Freemasons strive for truth, requiring high moral standards and aiming to achieve them in their own lives.

### The Organisation

Freemasons meet as Lodges. According to Masonic tradition, medieval European stonemasons would meet, eat, and shelter outside working hours in a lodge on the southern side of a building site, where the sun warms the stones during the day (the social part of a Masonic meeting is sometimes called the South).

Lodges meet under the jurisdiction of Grand Lodges which govern Masonry in their given geographical areas. There is no higher body that presides over worldwide Freemasonry; connections between Grand Lodges depend solely on mutual recognition.

All Grand Lodges maintain lists of other Lodges which promote similar standards and principles and are considered to be "regular". Other Lodges and bodies which claim to be Masonic (for example those that do not require a belief in a Supreme Being) are branded irregular. Regularity allows interaction between Lodges and gives individual Masons the opportunity to attend Lodge meetings in other jurisdictions. A Mason who visits an irregular Lodge may have his membership suspended, or he may be expelled.

Every new Lodge has a Warrant or Charter issued by a Grand Lodge, authorising it to meet and work. It must hold regular meetings at a fixed place and published dates; elect, initiate and promote its members and officers; manage its property and assets and keep minutes and records.

Every Lodge elects officers including a Worshipful Master. All lodges will have a Tyler, who guards the door when the lodge is in session. In addition, lodges have various appointed officers including a Chaplain appointed to lead a non-denominational prayer at the convocation of meetings or activities. The chaplain is often, but not necessarily, a clergyman.

### Membership Requirements

Joining Freemasonry is not by invitation only. In fact, in many jurisdictions, the brethren must wait for the potential candidate to inquire. Other jurisdictions allow for solicitation.

However the initial introduction is made, the official process of becoming a Mason begins when a candidate for Freemasonry formally petitions a lodge. The brethren will then investigate the candidate, to assure themselves of his good character, and hold a secret ballot. The number of adverse votes needed to reject a candidate varies. In some jurisdictions one "black ball" is enough to reject a petition, in others up to three are required.

Generally, to be accepted for initiation as a regular Freemason, a candidate must:

- Come of his own free will.
- Believe in a Supreme Being.
- Be at least the minimum age.
- Be of good morals, and of good reputation.
- Be of sound mind and body.
- Be free-born.
- Be capable of furnishing references.

Anyone wishing to become a Mason must be initiated in a Lodge and he will often remain a member of it for life. Most Lodges consist of Masons living or working in a given town or neighbourhood. Others are composed of Masons with a particular shared interest, profession or background.

## **Degrees**

The three degrees of Craft or Blue Lodge Freemasonry represent stages of personal development and are those of:

- Entered Apprentice: the degree of an Initiate;
- Fellow Craft: an intermediate degree;
- Master Mason: the "third degree", required for participation in most aspects of Masonry.

A candidate progresses through the degrees by gaining knowledge and understanding of himself, his relationship with others and his relationship with the Supreme Being.

There is no degree higher than that of Master Mason in Freemasonry but there are other recognised organisations for which being a Master Mason is a prerequisite of membership. An example is the Scottish Rite, which confers degrees numbered from 4 up to 33. Such bodies have no authority over the Craft but offer a deeper understanding on some of the allegorical, moral and philosophical content of Freemasonry. Some of them have additional requirements for membership, such as religious adherence (e.g., requiring members to profess Trinitarian Christian beliefs) or membership of other bodies.<sup>1</sup>

## **Ritual, Symbolism, and Morality**

Masonic meetings are highly ritualised. Each Jurisdiction is free to set its own ritual but there are many similarities across the board. All Masonic ritual makes use of architectural symbolism and uses the tools of the medieval stonemason as symbols to teach moral and ethical lessons. For example, using the square and compass, Masons may be taught to "square their actions by the square of virtue" and to learn to "circumscribe their desires and keep their passions within due bounds toward all mankind". However Freemasonry is non-dogmatic so there is no general interpretation for these tools or any other Masonic emblem.

Lessons are communicated through the performance of allegorical ritual. No Mason is told that there is only one meaning to the allegories; as he works through the degrees and studies their lessons, he interprets them for himself and comes to his own answers to life's important questions. Since there is no one accepted meaning, no one person "speaks" for the whole of Freemasonry.

## **The Supreme Being**

Initiates are required to declare a belief in a Supreme Being but they are not asked to expand on, or explain, their interpretation of Supreme Being. Indeed, the discussion of politics and

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<sup>1</sup> There are many organisations that are often believed to be related to Freemasonry, but which have no connections with it: organisations such as the Orange Order, the Knights of Pythias, or the Independent Order of Odd Fellows.

religion is forbidden within a Masonic Lodge. Reference to the Supreme Being will mean the Christian Trinity to a Christian Mason, Allah to a Muslim Mason, Brahman to a Hindu Mason, and so on. While most Masons take the view that the term Supreme Being equates to God, others have their own interpretations. In Masonic ritual, the Supreme Being is referred to as the Great Architect of the Universe (GAOTU).

## **The Volume of Sacred Law**

A Volume of the Sacred Law is always displayed in an open Lodge. In English-speaking countries, this is frequently the King James Version of the Bible but there is no such thing as an exclusive "Masonic Bible" In Lodges with a membership of mixed religions it is common to find more than one sacred text displayed.

## **Signs, Grips and Secrets**

The secrets of Freemasonry are concerned with recognition. It is not a secret society, since all members are free to acknowledge their membership and will do so in response to enquiries made for respectable reasons. Its constitutions and rules are available to the public and there is no secret about any of its aims and principles.

Freemasons use gestures, handshakes and words to gain admission to meetings and identify legitimate visitors. Since each Grand Lodge is free to create its own rituals, the signs, grips and passwords can differ from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Today, an unknown visitor may be required to produce a certificate, dues card or other documentation of membership in addition to demonstrating knowledge of the signs, grips and passwords.

## **Obligations**

Obligations are those elements of ritual in which a candidate swears to abide by the rules of the fraternity, to keep the "secrets of Freemasonry" and to act towards others in accordance with Masonic tradition and law. These obligations are sworn on the Volume of the Sacred Law before the Supreme Being and often with assurance that it is of the candidate's own free will.

Details of the obligations vary but common themes include promises to act in a manner befitting a member of civilised society, promises to obey the law of the Supreme Being, promises to obey the law of the sovereign state, promises to attend the Lodge if able, promises not to wrong, cheat nor defraud the Lodge or the brethren and promises to help members of the human family, brethren and their families in times of need if it can be done.

The obligations are well known for their "bloody penalties." The penalties are interpreted symbolically. They allude to how the candidate should feel about himself should he knowingly violate his obligation. Actual penalties include suspension, expulsion and reprimand.

## **Landmarks**

The Landmarks of Masonry are defined as its ancient and unchangeable principles. Each Grand Lodge is self-governing and no single authority exists over the whole of Freemasonry so the interpretation of these principles can vary, leading to controversies of recognition.

## **Charitable Effort**

One of Freemasonry's central preoccupations is charitable work within the local or wider community. Money is collected only from the membership and is devoted to charitable purposes. Masonic charitable causes include provision of sheltered housing, nursing care and education. Substantial amounts go to non-Masonic charities.

## **Freemasonry and Society**

Freemasonry demands that its members respect the law of the country in which they live. For a Mason to use his membership to promote his own or anyone else's professional or personal interests is contrary to the conditions on which he became a Mason. His duty as a citizen must always prevail over any obligation to other Masons, and any attempt to shield a Mason who has acted dishonourably or unlawfully is contrary to this prime duty.

## **Freemasonry and Christian Belief**

The Bible is not considered to be the exclusive Word of God, nor is it considered to be God's sole revelation of himself to man. It is only important as far as those members who claim to be Christians are concerned. The open Bible is used merely as a symbol of God's will, which can be captured in other sacred texts, like the Koran.

All members must believe in a deity but according to Freemasonry the different religions all acknowledge the same God, they merely call Him by different names. It is on this understanding that Masons unite in prayer at their Lodge meetings.

It is deemed to be un-Masonic to invoke the name of Jesus when praying, or mention His name in the Lodge. Suggesting that Jesus is the only way to God contradicts the principle of tolerance. The name of Jesus has been omitted from biblical verses that are used in Masonic rituals and Jesus is placed on the same level as other religious leaders.

The process of joining the Lodge requires Christians to ignore the exclusivity of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. According to Freemasonry, a person will be saved and go to heaven as a result of his good works and personal self-improvement.

Through symbols and emblems, Masons teach that man is not sinful, just "rude and imperfect by nature". Human beings are able to improve their character and behaviour in various ways, including acts of charity, moral living, and voluntary performance of civic duty. Humanity possesses the ability of moving from imperfection toward total perfection. Moral and spiritual perfection lies within men and women.

When a Christian takes the oath of Freemasonry, he is accepting these things. He is, at least implicitly, acknowledging that salvation can be gained by man's good works and that Jesus is just one of many equally revered prophets. He is agreeing that he has approached the Lodge in spiritual darkness and ignorance, when the Bible says Christians are already in the light. He is also agreeing not to talk of Christ in the Lodge.

Masonry leads Christians into blasphemy and taking the name of the Lord in vain by teaching that GAOTU, the Great Architect of the Universe, is representative of all gods in all religions. By taking the Masonic oath they are perpetuating a false gospel to other Lodge members, who look only to Masonry's plan of salvation to get them to heaven.