

“WHAT IS FREEMASONRY?”

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It is a bold person who seeks to answer this most simple of questions. Many shots have been made, often differing. Only last weekend, for instance, in the Fourth International Conference held at the Canonbury Masonic Research Centre, that immensely learned and delightful Netherland scholar, Evert Kwaadgras of Leiden, remarked of the topic that Freemasonry presents a bewildering panoply of divisions in space and time. Yet, as Masons of the present day, we need to be able to say something satisfying to potential candidates. We need to be able to have a coherent and rational answer for the public. Not least, we who are freemasons seriously need to have some considered understanding of what it is all about that we are conditioned into doing automatically.

I hope you will forgive my personal, and completely unauthorised, attempt today. As ever, I have no real qualifications for trying to scale Everest and take a view from the summit. But because it is there, and it looms, crannied and majestic, above us all, an ultimate challenge, attempts will always be made. And this is mine.

In the audience I am aware that there will be Masons of all shades of experience. Some Master Masons will perhaps be finding their feet, taking their first steps. What I might have to say needs to be tangible and of use to them. Some brethren will, while well settled into the experiences of Craft Masonry, not have explored off that beaten track. Fair enough; the ridge is straight and true, well-trodden. Some brethren, with time and money, will be well used to adventuring along the side valleys and finding the remoter, even more beautiful and select contemplative vantage points of the massif. They obtain their rewards. And finally, some brethren may by now be completely off-piste!!

What I suspect unites us all today, by simple virtue of our being here, is curiosity and a real willingness to step out to explore and understand more. May I add, controversially, that additions to knowledge and understanding ought also to carry with them both a greater capacity to challenge, and a willingness (which is not the same as a wish) to do so. My impression is that Freemasonry has suffered, not gained, from passivity and acceptance, proper only in their places. But the pendulum is swinging.

In what follows I hope to stimulate all at base camp here below the Everest peak. Indeed, by the end, because I think it is important towards a complete understanding of what Freemasonry is, I shall be outlining my personal concept of what lies up there, behind the mists of time, buried under the glaciers which give us the present familiar and joyful streams and falls of water by which we are refreshed. It is a vision I have glimpsed. I shall not try to left it in detail; this is not the place. I shall do so elsewhere. But I wish it to share it with you now because I think that both brethren and the popular world stand to gain much, and the sooner the better, from a wider appraisal of the background and significance of the Craft of Freemasonry.

In my substantial dictionary the definition of Freemason is given, for all to see, as: a member of a secret fraternity, united in lodges for social enjoyment and mutual assistance. This may strike you as old-fashioned. My edition is as recent as 1992 but I see it is largely based upon a first edition published in 1901. In recent years English Freemasonry has made a point of insisting that Freemasonry is a society with secrets, not a secret society. And it has struck out on a determined policy of ensuring that a substantial part of our charitable funds are given to non-Masonic causes, not, as before, devoted overwhelmingly towards Masonic interests and mutual assistance. Nevertheless the dictionary definition has survived for more than a century and continues to be the public image in general circulation. But, to cheer you up, I may add that under Freemasonry, besides the easy gloss of: the institutions, practices, etc. of Freemasons; there is also added: instinctive understanding and sympathy. It would be nice to think that this quality (in one word, of empathy) was indeed something by which Freemasonry was itself ‘instinctively’ connected in the public mind. I suspect we have some long way to go, but it may be a useful pointer.

Someone searching the internet to find out What is Freemasonry? may locate the Freemasonry Network site, whose information it claims to have been approved by the United Grand Lodge of England (UGLE). This explains, rather baldly: Freemasonry is the UK’s largest secular, fraternal and charitable organisation. It teaches moral lessons and self knowledge through participation in a progression of allegorical two-part plays. Though brief, this is perhaps more helpful, adding useful dimensions. Whether, however, members of the public or potentially-interested persons would think the better of, or be encouraged to join, such an organisation, is more doubtful. One would have to be an odd-ball indeed to give up time to listen to moral lessons and take part in a series of allegorical two-part plays. I wouldn’t do it, would you?!

I suppose this answer to the question posed is a definition like that for cheese: a wholesome article of food, made from the curd of milk coagulated by rennet, separated from the whey, and pressed into a solid mass. Cheese, like Freemasonry, occurs in many forms (so many across France that they boast of it as an integral illustration of their national culture) and one definition can suffice to document the basic nature and process. But who for pleasure would eat a wholesome curd of milk, coagulated, separated and pressed? Who might suspect the remarkable variety of texture and tang that may exquisitely accompany the climate and produce of so many localities? I do declare, that Freemasonry is a little more like real cheese than any cardboard cut-out of itself. We must beware of definition. No, somehow, to be successful, we must eschew the rennet in our explanations and capture the aroma. Freemasonry lives or dies by its

effect, not by its constitution and practices, important to the product and quality though these mechanics may be. Indeed, in the last analysis, what unites Freemasonry across the world is a similarity of enjoyment rather than any uniformity, or even regularity, of practice. It is the type, and calibre, of enjoyment which distinguishes this form of leisure activity from all others.

Members of the Grand Orient of France, for instance, do not have horns and tails, although we are strictly bound not to sit in their lodges. They are well imbued fraternally, and obtain similar pleasures to our own. But the struggles and triumphs of French political and cultural history have resulted in strongly entrenched aspects within their Freemasonry which do not sit comfortably with principles inherited and still cherished in Great Britain (like the monarchy). Those principles we adhere to, by the way, are not minor: they are woven into the very texture of Anglo-Saxon Freemasonry. Very interestingly, however, brethren of the Grand Orient are grateful for the Freemasonic vision and impulses transmitted to them across the Channel in the 18th century and, citing Newton and Locke, merely claim that they have developed that open quest for truth and equality further and more justly. So, indeed, what is Freemasonry? The old definition still works remarkably well: a peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols. All ethical Freemasonic bodies resonate to that chime. But the old definition concentrates on morality, fashionable in its day but uncomfortably pious now. What we like today is... both simpler and broader. I guess half a dozen things would surface frequently if we took a poll now, but as individuals we would give them different emphasis. We can all recognise the following English currently orthodox explanation of Freemasonry:

It is a most happy association of friends which provides interest, a discipline of life, many social activities for men and their families, and has long history of charitable support for the less fortunate members of our society. All this is combined with a history going back almost three hundred years... Freemasonry offers its members an approach to life which seeks to reinforce thoughtfulness for others, kindness in the community, honesty in business, courtesy in society and fairness in all things. This is good mild Cheshire cheese, perhaps of an Anglican variety.

Now try a little Jarlsberg, from Norway:

The Norwegian Order of Freemasons is a detached independent body of men from all walks of life and from all parts of the country. They meet regularly initially to work on their personal development. These meetings which are based on Christian thought are conducted with dignity and bound in tradition.

The idea and aim of Freemasonry is to influence the process of ennoblement and personal improvement by promoting humility, tolerance and compassion. Those qualities which the members master in the lodge should be practised in their daily lives.

These human qualities can of course be attained and practised by others who are not Freemasons, but the Order of Freemasons is an organisation where this thought has taken a practical form which enables its members to develop it through ancient rituals, and with dignity. The Norwegian Order of Freemasons does not engage itself in national or international political issues, nor does it engage itself in religious or social disputes. The members shall show loyalty to the authority and laws of the land. They shall show respect for the Order itself and the aims of Freemasonry...

To show compassion and fellowship is an obligation for each human being, but a freemason is especially bound and must be most vigilant in this area.

Do you find this rather nuttier, more structured, with perhaps a longer shelf-life in that thinner, Lutheran, climate? Norwegian Freemasonry, like that in all the Baltic countries, follows the Scandinavian (or Swedish) Rite of 10 Degrees which, besides being extremely beautiful, is very concentrated, serious and purposive. Much continental Freemasonry is similarly focused upon self-improvement, in which the office of Orator, almost unknown in England, plays a central part. It is the sort of Freemasonry which, idealised, Tolstoy brought into his epic War and Peace. Across the Atlantic, in North America, there are many Grand Lodges, each with its own slant. To explain Freemasonry much use is made of the phrase: the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man. Some declare an outward mission, such as the following:

The mission of Freemasonry in North Carolina is to raise the moral, social, intellectual and spiritual conscience of society by teaching the ancient and enduring tenets of Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth, which are expressed naturally through service to God, family, country and self under the Fatherhood of God within the Brotherhood of Man. Freemasons are certainly more visible in society in America than in many parts of the world, with widely respected social institutions, such as hospitals and youth groups. Brethren there also have a gift for smooth and persuasive phrases in advertising the Craft. The following sentences, for example, are taken from an interesting piece written by a past Grand Master of Missouri, Jeffrey O. Nations, published on the website of the Philalethes Society:

Freemasonry, the premier fraternity of choice for those who seek fellowship amongst men of goodwill... Acceptance of the Fatherhood of God is the very foundation of the Masonic institution; from this Fatherhood logically flows the Brotherhood of Man...Freemasonry is a broad system of Morals and Ethics...Our ancient brethren sought to erect temples fit for worship. Freemasonry's great mission is, and forever shall be, to make those who worship fit for temples.

I shall refrain from suggesting any resemblance to foil-wrapped and temptingly-creamy Philadelphia!

There are thus many flavours of Freemasonry. They have differing emphases of expression. But they are all recognisably Freemasonic in their subject-matter and attitudes, prizing honour, truth and virtue as the basis for their social engagement.

Now I shall turn to my own thoughts. The enjoyment of cheese is a personal thing! The fullness of enjoyment comes from knowing where it comes from, maybe how it was made, and savouring the redolence, that *je ne sais quoi*, perhaps alongside bread and wine.

First, I am surprised that none of the explanations we have heard lays much stress on the sense of quest inherent in Freemasonry. As Masons we are, or should be, always in search. As presented ceremonially and allegorically it may be for the lost word, or for a number of other things. As presented morally and spiritually, we search our conscience: we are pledged always to regulate our actions by the precepts of the Volume of the Sacred Law and to apply the four cardinal virtues in our daily living. As presented socially, we are charged to pursue sympathy, the right word; and benevolence and charity, the finding-out and relief of misfortune. As presented entire, we journey into unknown reaches, and are surprised by what we stumble over.

By the same token, secondly, we are, or should be, challenged. Freemasonry challenges. If it did not, as in the way of merely philanthropic bodies, it would most likely have died ere since. We are broadly challenged in all the ways just mentioned. But, significantly, we are individually challenged. As initiates this is clear. But even more challenging is the 'work' that brethren have to undertake to bring off a successful ceremony and social occasion. A tension, and a release. Who has not come out of the Master's chair for the first time, conscientiously, without having 'grown' from the experience?

And to continue, thirdly, who has not sat in lodge on occasion and marvelled at the quality and harmony of what brethren have been able to produce? Such things produce a lift, a 'high' in our living. Like a drug, do we go on hoping for more? There is ecstatic pleasure to be gained in the course of Masonic experience. We should be proud of it and say so. Indeed, and this may be the nub, Freemasonry at its best produces the conditions by which its members are raised from the mundane into personal epiphanies. An epiphany is a manifestation. A personal epiphany is a moment of significance, perhaps of insight, perhaps of horror, or of special joy; something overwhelming and usually delightful, bigger than we are. Yes, a lot of Freemasonry is very pleasant and cordial, but there are special moments to be thrilled by, called up through the chemistry and art inherent in the Masonic ethos and method. What is that phrase, in the prayer over a candidate?: ... that, assisted by the secrets of our Masonic art, he may the better be enabled to unfold the beauties of true godliness. Herein lies an astonishing and central secret of the Craft, too little regarded. Towards the end of my previous Cornerstone talk I poetically referred to this as alchemy: I do not think the analogy is misplaced.

In this sketch I hope that I have given a sense of the size and complexity of the Masonic Everest. It has endured. It will continue to challenge, puzzle, delight and transcend. It is worthy of our mettle. I promised to end by peering into the clouds and endeavouring to give a glimpse of the basis of the head glaciers. I will try to do so briefly, but because the territory is so strange, so remote, so frozen in time, I must prepare you, with three steps.

Three chance discoveries along the route into the past have caused me to descry what I think I do. The first one was the finding in early literature of elements that we use in Freemasonry today. Specifically, several parts of what we do for initiation in the first degree can be followed as early as 1611 in London. This is a century earlier than the first traditionally accepted known ritual usages, and is more than 100 years before the inception of the premier Grand Lodge in London. Moreover, there are elements in that literature, by the same author, which hint at more than one side degree. In other words, symbolical and ritual usage, reminiscent not just of the Craft but also of Mark Masonry and knightly orders, is evidenced during the Renaissance, at the start of the 17th century, not at its end. This points to an already well-developed ritual usage at an early date, hitherto merely hinted at by the clause concerning 'the art of memory' in the Scottish Schaw Statutes of 1599. The second was finding that in the medieval sign language used by monks - the sign which we use as the basic one among Freemasons (the penal sign of an Entered Apprentice) - is identical to the one used by them when referring to a martyr, one who had died for his fidelity. This correspondence I have felt to be too strong to be a coincidence, especially when it is taken into account that the special patron saints of the Mason Craft in the Middle Ages, internationally, were the Four Crowned Martyrs. These masons and sculptors were executed in the reign of the Roman emperor Diocletian, on a date traditionally given as 8 November AD 302, for refusing to comply with the hard-line pagan worship commanded by the emperor (at a period when many Christians were suffering similar martyrdoms). These masonic craftsmen died rather than submit to imperious demands that they break their most sacred allegiance. The third was a re-reading of the texts of the constitutions of the medieval German *Steinmetzen*. Dating from around 1460, the detailed provisions ran parallel to the much more sketchy English Old Charges of similar date, but also, to my mind significantly, included references to symbolism, operative practice and ceremony which we can echo today. The courtly and stylised greeting of visiting masons, for instance, responded to by phrases ending "I greet you well" (in medieval times, and into the 18th century, repeated symbolically thrice) continues as a constant feature, a memorial, even after a period at least 600 years. In other words, to summarise, there seems to be evidence which very suggestively points to a continuing tradition of ceremonial and ritual practice which goes back before 1717, before the Scottish Renaissance, right back into the medieval period.

The Middle Ages were intensely religious. Consciousness of God, and the perishability of the soul, were humanised by vivid illumination of the sufferings of Christ and other saints and martyrs, and by the tendernesses associated with the Virgin Mary and other female saints. Medieval thinkers found it natural to try to find out the designs and wisdom of God by comparing what they saw of the natural world. Symbols were used sophisticatedly to communicate to the lettered and unlettered alike. The Bible was scoured for types and antitypes, which were then pictured in carving and illumination, and enacted in plays. Pious ceremonies, and charitable works, helped to protect folk from the fear of Hell. Briefly, I see Freemasonry as having, in its essence, descended from this period. Others have before. But my appreciation, rightly or wrongly, goes further. I see in our penal sign the 'to order' faithfulness of the Mason Craft as a memorial to their martyr

saints. I see in our acacia branches a Masonic adaptation of the palm fronds used to designate all martyrs. I see in our five points of fellowship a Masonic parallelism of the five wounds of Christ. I see in our crown of joy and rejoicing, as referred to in certain Installation addresses, the traditional reward of a martyr. And I see, but will not here describe, how the surprisingly broad span of side degrees, chivalric and saintly orders seemed to spring up like mushrooms in the 18th century.

A martyr is not simply one who suffers but is literally one who shows, bears witness to his beliefs and standards through thick and thin, and in exhibiting, confesses to them. The large noble army of martyrs in Diocletian's day and before won their crowns the hard way. The medieval Worshipful Mystery of the Mason Craft pursued their science and disciplines in an acute awareness, to the point of specialised celebration, of the virtues associated with faithfulness, order and integrity. High up the mountain it is those early snows which have fed the streams by which we are refreshed and in whose successive pools and falls we take our occasionally ecstatic joys.

Freemasonry is thus, finally, in its most profound and meaningful sense, an ancient mystery. That it is so, and that its tenets and effects are as they are, is something of which I think, especially in modern times, we should be proud to confess.

To end on such a rarified, mystical note may not satisfy all my readers. I therefore offer the following as a more solid attempt to bring together to my satisfaction, and I hope to yours, all that has been referred to in answering the question: What is Freemasonry? Freemasonry is unique, a deep-rooted mystery, defying exact description. It is concerned with the meaning of life, with truth, beauty, and the exercise of goodness.

It is neither a philosophy nor a religion though it promotes wholeheartedly the objects of both. Through entering into Masonic activity its members frequently find themselves becoming better people, more principled, understanding, and socially adept. Membership is expressed in fellowship and good works.

Freemasonry exists worldwide, often taking differing forms according to the cultural background of the region. While these appear similar, official recognition between national Grand Lodges depends largely upon key elements of their principles and practice. The United Grand Lodge of England requires belief in a central divinity, given expression in the phrase 'the Great Architect of the Universe'. It otherwise makes no demands as to religion and maintains a firmly non-political stance. It expects members to endeavour to act morally at all times and to obey the laws of the land. While offering friendship and, when proper, kindly assistance to one another, members are not entitled to seek mutual favours. The benefit of members' charitable activities are shared widely in the community, in accordance with the core value of universal benevolence felt in Freemasons' hearts.

Freemasonry includes a rich symbolism and the performance of ritual in its progressive proceedings, but the effects of this cannot be appreciated except through trial, acclimatisation, and practice. Freemasonry harmonises all the spiritual, moral, social, cultural and mystical elements of human nature, and good men, to their surprise, have found delight and fulfilment in it over many centuries. There is always more for those that seek, and peace for those who do not.