

# Deism in the Masonic Lodge

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What is Deism? Does the Masonic Lodge practice Deism? Are the accusations of the uninformed that the Masonic Lodge is anti-Christian based on the alleged practice of Deism in the Masonic Lodge? Is the Masonic Lodge's requirement that applicants only believe in a supreme being and not necessarily profess a belief in any specific organized religion tantamount to the practice of Deism? These are some of the questions that occurred to me when I started this study.

What is Deism? Webster's Third New International Dictionary defines Deism as "a rationalistic movement of the 17th and 18th centuries whose adherents generally subscribe to a natural religion based on human reason and morality, on the belief in one God who after creating the world and the laws governing it, refrained from interfering with the operation of those laws, and on the rejection of every kind of supernatural intervention in human affairs."

The World Book Encyclopedia states "Deism is a religious and philosophic belief. Deism rejects most conventional forms of religion, accepting reason as the only guide to truth. It embraces the concept of God, however, in the limited sense of a creator, or first cause, of the physical and moral laws of the universe. Deists compare God's act of creation to that of a watchmaker who builds a watch, sets it in motion, and then refuses to intervene in its actions.

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Deism became popular during the 1700's. Deist ideas appear in the writings of such philosophers as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Voltaire of France and Immanuel Kant of Germany. In America, deist ideas appear in the Declaration of Independence and the Preamble to the Constitution. Those ideas reflect political influence of leading deists of the time: Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine. The deist concept of God underlies such phrases as 'In God We Trust' and 'we are endowed by the Creator with certain inalienable rights'."

Merriam - Webster's Collegiate Encyclopedia defines Deism as a "Belief in God based on reason rather than revelation or the teachings of any specific religion. A form of natural religion, Deism originated in England in the early 17th century as a rejection of orthodox Christianity. Deists asserted that reason could find evidence of God in nature and that God had created the world and then left it to operate under the natural laws he had devised. The philosopher Edward Herbert (1583-1648) developed this view in *On Truth* (1624). By the late 18th century, Deism was the dominant religious attitude among Europe's educated classes; it was accepted by many upper-class Americans of the same era, including the first three U. S. presidents."

In the Introduction to his book, *The History of Freemasonry*, Albert Mackey quoted De Witt Clinton who said, "Of all institutions which have been established for the purpose of improving the condition of mankind, Freemasonry stands preeminent in usefulness as it is in age. Its origin is lost in the abyss of unexplored antiquity. No historical records, no traditionary accounts, can with certainty point out the precise time, the place, or the particular manner of its commencement. While some have endeavored to discover its footsteps amongst the master-builders and artists engaged in the construction of the first Jewish temple, others have attempted to trace it to the Eleusinian mysteries, which are said to have taught the immortality of the soul and the other sublime truths of natural religion. Some again have ascribed its rise to the sainted heroes of the Crusades; while

others have endeavored to penetrate the mysteries of the Druids, and to discover its origins amongst the wise men of that institution."

Between 1550 and 1700, the Freemasons changed. They ceased to be an illegal trade union of working masons who accepted all the doctrines of the Catholic Church, and became an organization of intellectual gentlemen who favored religious toleration and friendship between men of different religions, and thought that a simple belief in God should replace controversial theological doctrines. In the language of the time, the "operative masons" were replaced by "admitted masons" or "gentlemen masons" as they were usually called in Scotland. In later times these admitted masons were called "speculative masons", but this term was not used before 1757.

No one really knows how this change came about. Masonic historians have written long and learned books giving their explanations which have been refuted by other Masonic historians in equally long and learned books, while the anti-Masonic writers, with their popular best-sellers, have put forward their own theories. Some of the explanations have been far fetched and almost ridiculous. Others have been very convincing and are supported by a great deal of plausible evidence, but there is equally strong evidence which suggests that the explanation is wrong.

There was a long tradition of trade guilds accepting as members men who had no connection with the trade. The livery companies of the City of London — the oldest one was the Weavers, which was founded in 1155 — originally consisted of members of the trade. But from the earliest times the liverymen's sons, if they had been born after their father joined the livery, could become liverymen by patrimony. In the Middle Ages a man usually followed his father's trade, but sometimes he did not; and this did not prevent him from joining the livery. Apart from this, the livery companies could admit as liverymen

men who had no connection with the company, either by birth or occupation; and they often did so.

In 1685 Charles II died, and was succeeded by his brother James, who was openly a Roman Catholic, though he upheld the rule of the Church of England, of which he was the Supreme Governor. He suspended the laws against Roman Catholics in England, but increased the severity of the persecution in Scotland. Then he changed his policy; he used his royal power of dispensation to grant religious toleration to both Roman Catholics and Nonconformists. He hoped to win the support of the Nonconformists, whose political allies were becoming known as the Whigs, against their Church of England persecutors; but the Quaker, William Penn, was the only Nonconformist leader who fell into James's trap and supported him. The others were too suspicious of Roman Catholics; they remembered the persecution of Protestants in England under Mary Tudor 130 years before, and more recently abroad by foreign Catholic sovereigns. Instead they made a united front with the Church of England against James, and invited James's son-in-law, William of Orange, to come from the Netherlands with an army to get rid of James. William landed in Devon, and in December 1688 James fled to France. In England it was a bloodless and "glorious" revolution. There was armed Catholic resistance in Scotland and Ireland, but by 1690 it had been defeated.

The revolution of 1688 introduced religious toleration for everyone except Roman Catholics and Unitarians. The Catholics were not persecuted as they had been in earlier times, but they were unable to play any part in public life, either as MPs, judges, army officers or at the universities, unless they took an oath that they did not believe in the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. This oath had to be taken by anyone who applied for any official position. The applicant was also required to swear that he had not been given a dispensation by the Pope allowing him to perjure himself by falsely swearing that he rejected transubstantiation. This was a remarkably silly provision, because if he had

been granted a Papal dispensation to swear falsely that he did not believe in transubstantiation, he might also have been granted a dispensation to swear that he had not been granted a dispensation.

Not surprisingly, many Catholics believed that the Freemasons had played an important part in bringing about the Revolution of 1688, and in later years the Freemasons themselves were very ready to claim credit for it. But in fact the masons played no part at all in the Revolution. None of the leading figures in the Revolution were Freemasons — not William III, nor his Whig Lord Chancellor Lord Somers; not Lord Churchill, the commander-in-chief of James II's army, who deserted James at a critical moment during the Revolution, and was rewarded by being created Earl of Marlborough; not the seven bishops whose acquittal by a London jury, when they were prosecuted by James II for sedition, sparked off the Revolution; not George Savile, Marquess of Halifax, and the other leading dignitaries who signed the invitation to William of Orange to invade England and make himself king. While the Revolution was taking place, the Freemasons were quietly attending their lodge meetings; but after it had succeeded, they were able to take advantage of the new situation which was much more favorable for them.

However, Freemasons were becoming unpopular in certain quarters. In 1698 a leaflet attacking the Freemasons was distributed in the streets of London. The author's name was given as "Mr. Winter", but no one has been able to find out anything about him; and his leaflet had so little effect that it disappeared without a trace until it was discovered by Masonic historians in 1937. There seems to be very little doubt that the writer was a High Anglican Tory.

He told "all godly people in the City of London" that he must warn them "of the Mischiefs and Evils practiced in the Sight of God by those called Freed Masons...For this devilish

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Sect of Men are Meeters in secret which swear against all without their following. They are Anti Christ which was to come, leading Men from fear of God." It was the secrecy of the masons, and their secret oaths, which alarmed Mr. Winter, as it was to alarm all the anti-masons during the next 300 years. If the Freemasons were a lawful and reputable society, why the secrecy? Men do not hide their virtues and their good deeds; it is their vices and crimes which they wish to conceal.

But if the masons' secrecy aroused the suspicions of the anti-Masons, it fascinated the Masons themselves. They liked to believe that they and they alone, knew important secrets. The seventeenth century was a period of new discoveries, in geography, medicine and science. Were there even more important new discoveries that God had revealed only to the Freemasons? Men became convinced that the Masonic secrets were the secrets that they had always wished to discover. The Welsh clergyman and poet, Goronwy Owen, believed that if he joined a Freemasons' lodge, he would discover the legends of the ancient Welsh Druids. The distinguished eighteenth century antiquarian, Dr. William Stukeley, wrote in his autobiography that he had joined the Freemasons out of curiosity, "suspecting it to be the remains of the mysteries of the ancients".

In 1714 John Theophilus Desaguliers was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society, and was later appointed Curator of the Society. In 1717 he lectured before King George I at Hampton Court.

He probably became interested in Freemasonry because he thought that it was the best method of furthering the tolerant deism in religion in which he believed. He had a shrewd understanding of the society which had been established in his country of adoption by the Revolution of 1688 and the accession of the House of Hanover; he knew that England had become a nation ruled by the great landed aristocracy. If the nobility could be

persuaded to become Freemasons, then Freemasonry would flourish as a society of deists, free from persecution or harassment.

In 1723 the principles of Masonry were published by Dr. Anderson in his *Constitutions*; but though Anderson had been instructed by Grand Lodge to write the *Constitutions*, his draft was discussed and amended by a committee of fourteen of the leading members of Grand Lodge, including Desaguliers. It is unlikely that Dr. Anderson was personally responsible for the principles of Freemasonry laid down in his *Constitutions*. They stated the loyalty of the Freemasons to the House of Hanover; but, subject to this, they avoided all declarations of political allegiance, and forbade political discussions in the lodges. They emphasized the dominant role of the aristocracy in Freemasonry, and, where religion was concerned, they put forward principles which came close to deism.

Under the protection of the aristocracy, the Freemasons could safely declare their religious principles. Although some Masonic historians have denied that Dr. Anderson's *Constitutions* advocated deism, it came close to doing so. The statement about religion is completely different from the charges of the Roman Catholic operative masons of the Middle Ages. The article on religion read as follows:

A mason is obliged by his tenure to obey the moral law; and if he rightly understands the Art, he will never be a stupid Atheist, or an irreligious libertine. But though in ancient times Masons were charged in every country to be of the religion of that country or nation, whatever it was, yet 'tis now thought more expedient only to oblige them to that religion in which all men agree, leaving their particular opinion to themselves; that is to be good men and true, or men of honour and honesty, by whatever denominations or persuasions they may be distinguished; whereby Masonry becomes a center of union, and the means of consolidation true friendship among persons that must have remained at a perpetual distance.

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This opened the Freemasons' Lodges to anyone who believed in God or the "Great Architect of the Universe" as he is called in Dr. Anderson's *Constitutions*. Roman Catholics were not excluded. They could not be MPs, army officers, or hold any public position in the state; but they would be welcome in a Freemasons' lodge. Jews were also welcome, though they were at first a little reluctant to join. Jews had been admitted, perhaps as early as 1724, and certainly by 1732.

The article on the duty to obedience to the King and his government was unusual and reads as follows:

A mason is a peaceable subject to the civil powers, wherever he resides or works, and is never to be concerned in plots and conspiracies against the peace and welfare of the nation. If a brother should be a rebel against the state, he is not to be countenanced in his rebellion, however he may be pitied as an unhappy man; and if convicted of no other crime, though the brotherhood must and ought to dismiss his rebellion, and give no umbrage or ground of political jealousy to the government for the time being; they cannot expel him from the lodge, and his relation to it remains indefeasible.

This provision, while clearly repudiating treason, sedition and rebellion against the state, shows a very tolerant understanding of those who refuse to obey the existing government: the Freemasons were determined that the rights and wrongs of the rebels' activities should not be discussed in the lodge. It was very different from the violent and abusive denunciations of traitors in which commentators indulged in Tudor times, and would similarly indulge in the totalitarian dictatorships of the twentieth century.

The ban on religious and political discussions in the lodge appealed to many people who were disgusted by the bitterness of the controversies of the seventeenth century. This article from Anderson's *Constitutions* reads in part as follows:

The next thing that I shall remember you of is, to avoid politics and religion. Have nothing to do with these, as you tender your own welfare.... Ours is the best policy, it is honesty; it is the policy of the holy Jesus, who never disturbed governments, but left them as he found them, and rendered to Caesar the things that were Caesar's.... It is the same thing in relation to the religion we profess, which is the best that ever was, or will or can be... for it is the law of Nature, which is the law of God, for God is Nature. It is to love God above all things, and our neighbor as our self; this is the true, primitive, catholic and universal religion agreed to be so in all times and ages.

In their book *Freemasonry: A Celebration of the Craft*, Hamill and Gilbert state that all of the degrees associated with Masonry in the various rites and their variations add up to some 1,400 different degrees, with their own procedures and differences. Some, like the Knights Templar, are specifically Christian, and their ritual contains express references to Christ; other degrees have the deistic concept of the Great Architect of the Universe. All of the brothers in their various rites and degrees have one thing in common: they are all Freemasons. All must believe in some kind of God, a Great Architect of the Universe; and in all meetings of the lodge the Book of the Sacred Law must lie open throughout the proceedings.- In England and the United States the Book of the Sacred Law is the Bible, but it can be the Roman Catholic New Testament, the Jewish Old Testament, the Muslim Koran, or the holy book of any religion.

Now, comparing the religious views expressed in the oldest Masonic Constitution of the 14th century, with those set forth in the later ones of the 16th and 17th, and again with those laid down in the charge of 1717, we find an exact record of the transitions which

from time to time took place in the religious aspect of Freemasonry in England and in some other countries.

At first it was Roman Catholic in its character, and under ecclesiastical domination.

Then, after the Reformation, rejecting the doctrines of Rome and the influence of the priesthood, it retained its Christian character, but became Protestant in its peculiar views.

Lastly, at the time of the so-called Revival, in the beginning of the 18th century, when Speculative Masonry assumed that form which it has ever since retained, it abandoned its sectarian character, and adopted a cosmopolitan and tolerant rule, which required of its members, as a religious test, only a belief in God.

During the seventeenth century, English settlers went to the North American colonies. It is very possible that some of the English emigrants to North America in the seventeenth century were Freemasons, and that they opened Masonic lodges here; but there is no record of Freemasonry in North America before the establishment of the Grand Lodge in England. After 1717, the English Grand Lodge exported Freemasonry to North America as it did to the European Continent. When the settlers in the American colonies heard that in England Freemasonry was becoming fashionable among the highest ranks of society, they wished to follow the English example and form Masonic lodges on their side of the Atlantic. Lodges had been established in Boston and Philadelphia by 1730.

Freemasonry had its critics in America as in Britain. The stricter Protestant sects did not like the tolerant deism, and as in England, it was both criticized for its ceremonies and ritual. In America, as in England, Freemasonry attracted two different types — the

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philosophical intellectuals and the gentlemen who thought that a Masonic lodge was a useful and agreeable social gathering. Benjamin Franklin was one of the first kind, with his ideas on freedom of worship and religious toleration, which in his case came closer to deism than it did in any of the leading brothers in the English Grand Lodge in the 1720s and 1730s.

Even today, the Freemasons in the United States, like the Freemasons in Britain, deny that they are a religion. However, an organization which insists that its members believe in God — though they call him the Great Architect of the Universe to show that he may be either the Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu or any, other God — is clearly an organization of Deists.

So my brothers, as you can see, many of the early leaders of Freemasonry were Deists. The early Constitutions of Freemasonry espoused Deistic principles. Many of the early leaders of this country were also the leaders of our great fraternity and many of them mere Deist. The founding documents of our country contain Deist principles as do most of our Masonic organizations. Does this make us Deists? Does this justify the criticisms of the uninformed that we are anti-Christian? Are the majority of the Masonic organizations Deists? Or are we merely practicing the principles of associating with good men regardless of their religious preference? I would encourage you my brothers to read extensively about the origins of our great fraternity, study the rituals of the various Masonic organizations, search for the hidden meanings in these rituals, study the lessons taught by our many Degrees and Orders, debate these issues with well informed brethren, and then after you have become well versed on the subject, you be the judge and answer these questions in your mind.

Thanks you for attention this morning and I hope that I have presented something that will inspire you to further research and study in the history, traditions, rituals, hidden meanings, and teachings of our gentle Craft.

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