

Masonry and Religion

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Some churches are complaining today that Masonry is not compatible with Christianity. An examination of the evidence suggests that the question should really be, "Is the church compatible with Christianity?" The question, honestly put, does not beg an answer but suggests first that church history is too full of instances of pride, cruelty and violence for the church to cast the first stone. Secondly, it suggests that the present controversy should never be reduced to an attack by the church and a defense by Masonry. When such lines of battle are drawn, the roles expected of both sides may become too rigid for the advancement of knowledge and understanding.

It must be stated at the outset that no counterattack against Masonry's detractors is intended. Religious bodies tend to be conservative. All bureaucracies, including those of organized religion, tend more to preserve the status quo than to pursue the goals for which the institution was founded. Religious bodies are no more exempt from this pattern than secular bureaucracies. Therefore, this essay should not be considered as a criticism of the Roman Catholic Church. When there was no competition for the universal Church except for a handful of heretics, there was no need for the church to alter its opinion of itself or its competitors. Dr. James M. Robinson, when at Emory University, said that if the Roman Catholic Church dispersed, one or more of the main line Protestant denominations would rush to fill the need for a conservator of traditional power and claims of the Church. Some readers may remember instances when a dominant Protestant church overshadowed life and values in its community. Admirers of such churches argued then and argue now that the church's dominance made a better community.

Nor should the conclusion be drawn that the Roman Catholic Church is singled out for anti-Masonic bias. Some American denominations, such as the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod and Free Methodists, have long-standing anti-Masonic biases. The separation of the Free Methodist Church from the main body of Methodism grew out of the Morgan affair.

We may miss the point of the relationship of "the Church" and Masonry if we limit our examination to these two bodies alone. Should we not be asking how Masonry gets along with everyone else but the Church and how the Church gets along with everyone else but the Masonic Order.

The emergence of Masonry as a world movement came at a bad time for the Roman Catholic Church. In the eighteenth century, when the Premier Grand Lodge was founded and Masonry was spreading like wildfire, the power of the Roman Catholic Church and its political allies was perilously threatened. The Church had long depended upon the power of Spain, with its Catholic Majesties, and France, "the eldest daughter" of the Church. By 1737, when the Vatican first denounced Freemasonry, Spain had passed her peak. In a few years, France and England would fight a bloody war to determine who would sit on the Spanish throne. France had suffered the first of a series of defeats at the hands of the English. In Scotland, an attempt to seat the Catholic "Old Pretender" (styled James III) on the British throne by force of arms had failed. Even the Holy Roman Empire, a loose confederation of German and Italian states and which has been described by historians as neither holy, Roman or an empire, was decaying and would shortly disintegrate.

On all fronts, the Catholic Church was losing ground. It was unbelievable, but the Jesuits were expelled from Spain in the eighteenth century. In France, Gallicanism and Jansenism undermined the power and authority of the Church. Reformed churches had become reasonably secure in Protestant Europe not many years earlier. Presbyterian order prevailed in Scotland only in 1690. The Thirty Years War between Catholic and Protestant

factions of the Holy Roman Empire ended less than a hundred years earlier. Therefore, the Catholic Church and its relationships with individuals and organizations must be seen in the light of world politics. It is therefore not surprising that the expansion of Masonry was seen as a threat by the eighteenth-century Catholic Church. A Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted (i.e., Operative and Speculative) Masons, founded on principles of the brotherhood of man - all men - and the Fatherhood of God introduced a new social element that was an implicit challenge to the supremacy of the Church in social matters. Although early Masonic ritual was explicitly Christian, Masons did not acknowledge the Roman Catholic Church as the only vehicle in which God might move about His earth. The evidence also suggests that Masonry was much more involved in politics in Mediterranean countries than expected or allowed in modern English-speaking Lodges. The use of Masonry as a political force may have been the most objectionable aspect of the relationship between Lodge and Church. The Roman Church had real reasons to fear Masonry in the eighteenth century.

From its beginnings, Roman Catholicism was a politically based church. We are all familiar with the story of Constantine and his battle with Maxentius for control of the Roman Empire. As his Army approached the Milvian Bridge, now in the suburbs of Rome, Constantine saw a cross in the air and heard the motto, "In This Sign Conquer" (In Hoc Signo Vinces). Constantine became a Christian like his mother and organized the Church like the Empire. As there was an Emperor to rule the Empire, so there was a Bishop (the Bishop of Rome) to rule the Church. Consuls and proconsuls ruled the territories into which the Empire was divided, just as Archbishops and bishops ruled the territories of the Church. When Constantine moved his court to Constantinople (Byzantium), the power of the Pope was substantially increased. His authority spilled over into secular politics.

The temporal rulers, both the Emperors that followed Charlemagne and the local feudal giants, held substantial sway over the Church until the time of Pope Gregory VII, a German by the name of Hildebrand, and the "Investiture Controversy." Until then, the general practice was that Bishops would be chosen by local rulers and the Pope notified.

Gregory claimed the right to invest Bishops with their "spiritualities and their temporalities." That is, the Pope claimed the right to decide who would represent the Church at York, not merely to agree to who empower the representative of the King of England in the Cathedral of York Minster. It was an important counter in the balance of power between Emperor and Pope. Bishops wielded great secular power, not just religious readership. For example, a great portion of the actual land in Medieval London was taken up by politically active Bishops and Abbots. The account books of the Bishop of Ely about 1400 suggest that the expense of running a proper Bishop's seat of power in London cost more than the stipends of the hundred priests who served the parish churches in the City of London. An unneeded portion of the Abbot of Hyde's residence was the Tabard Inn of Canterbury Tales. Bishops and "mitered" abbots sat as the third house of Parliament. Even today, they are entitled to a seat in the House of Lords.

Hildebrand was opposed by Henry IV. The most memorable moment in the long battle was after Gregory excommunicated Henry. The latter, dressed in sackcloth and ashes, barefoot in the snow, pleaded for forgiveness before the gates of the papal castle at Canossa. After the death of both of these bullheaded Nordics, the Church gained a modest but exceptionally important victory. The power of the Church continued to grow until 1204, when Pope Innocent III and the Fourth Lateran Council became virtual masters of European politics. Almost exactly a hundred years later, the Church's power had so fallen that the Pope and the curia were virtual prisoners of the King of France and seemed more included to do his will than God's. From 1378, the Church was fractured with Popes claiming loyalty to Avignon, Pisa and Rome. In 1414, the Council of Constance declared Popes John XXIII (Balasarro Cossa) and Benedict XIII (Pedro de Luna) deposed and installed Martin V in Rome. The church never fully recovered its political power.

The Supreme Council of the Scottish Rite has provided Masons and the public with the text of the papal letter HUMANUM GENUS of Pope Leo XIII, dated April 20, 1884, which vilifies Masonry and the "Spirit of the Age." Most ages, including our own, earn the condemnation of moralists. We need think little before we produce a long list of ills in our

society which demand correction. We can be quite specific. Leo XIII was generally less specific. He makes up, however, what he lacks in specificity about Masonry with expansive claims for the Church. He equates the Kingdom of God on Earth with the Church he heads. Unfortunately, newspapers daily remind us of the failure of a variety of churches and religious leaders of a wide variety of persuasions to come up to the standards of God or even those of their own religious bodies.

Amid vague and inadmissible charges, such as doing Satan's work, the real anger of Pope Leo XIII is shown toward the end of the missive. Masons, he declares, seduce people away from their proper rulers and promote usurpers. In a way, familiar to Americans, this charge is true. Certainly Washington, and a host of other organizers and achievers of American independence were Freemasons. The same was true in Italy. Garibaldi and others were Masons and, in creating a unified Italy from a myriad of tiny kingdoms, duchies and republics, they displaced the Pope as an earthly monarch. The Papal States, once ruled by the Pope, became part of a national Italy.

Unfortunately, the Church failed to appreciate that this divestiture may have been far more beneficial to the Roman Church than maintenance of its temporal establishment. By ridding itself of the political administration of its territories, the care of its frontiers and the wars Cesare Borgia and Pope Julian II seemed to enjoy fighting, the Roman Catholic Church may now devote all its energies and resources to expressing the love of God which we see in Jesus Christ. In this endeavor, Freemasonry wishes them every success.

Freemasonry has recently come under widespread attack from religious bodies, especially in Great Britain. The Methodist Church there has forbidden use of their facilities for Masonic activities. The Synod of the Church of England has adopted a report critical of Masonry, although a critic recently called the Church of England "a stronghold of Freemasonry" for more than 200 years. (Knight, Stephen, *The Brotherhood*, Dorset Press, 1984, p. 240.) The Free Church of Scotland condemned the Fraternity, although newspaper accounts of their discussions reported that the speakers said they did not

know much about Masonry. The Church of Scotland, which numbers many Masons among its ministers, condemned Masonry at its 1989 General Assembly. Why have modern churches with histories of benign relationships with Freemasonry suddenly become frightened about the religion and ethics of the Craft?

This recent concern on the part of British churches follows the literary efforts of Stephen Knight. His *Jack the Ripper: The Final Solution*, published in 1976, (London; Grafton Books) alleged that the Ripper murders were the result of a monstrous Masonic conspiracy, involving royalty and high-level government and police officials. According to Knight, the plot was designed to rescue the Duke of Clarence, oldest son of the Prince of Wales, and second in line to the throne, from an ill-advised, secret marriage to a Catholic girl living in Whitechapel, the sector of the London slums where the murders were committed. The daughter of this marriage, a Roman Catholic, was therefore third in line to the throne. The times were politically unstable, if not outright republican. If the marriage and the birth of the child were to become public knowledge, abundant tinder would be heaped upon the smoldering embers of revolution. The murders, Knight contended, were to silence the women who knew about the marriage.

Knight's attempts to prove that the victims were murdered in strict conformity with Masonic ritual are, at best, silly. His rationale of the mechanics of the murders defies logic. However, the book was scandalous enough to sell well and written well enough to create an air of paranoia with regard to the Craft.

Knight followed the success of *Jack the Ripper: The Final Solution* with *The Brotherhood*, (*Op. cit*) expanding the attack on Freemasonry on a wide front. He charged that in England Masonry has corrupted law enforcement, the courts of justice, banking, employment practices and social life. These charges have vague references and cannot be verified or refuted. However, in the case of "Operation Countryman," Knight was correct to point out that a series of crimes committed in London between 1971 and 1977 had involved the collaboration of police officials and common criminals, all of whom were

Masons. Personal efforts to obtain an official report on "Operation Countryman" from Scotland Yard have met with silence. The Rev. Cyril Barker Cryer, secretary of Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076, advises that no government "white paper" was published.

Knight is particularly severe in the area of religion. He contends that Masonry is nothing short of Devil worship, a religion with its own distinct god, described at times as "The Great Architect of the Universe." It should be noted that the description of God as "The Great Architect of the Universe" is not a Masonic innovation, but is a representation front art of the Church of the Middle Ages.

It is unlikely that the more malignant critics of Freemasonry can ever be satisfied. Trying to cut the cloth of our ancient order to fit their tastes would certainly be a waste of time. On the other hand, we have an obligation to our Craft and to ourselves and to the dignity and demonstrable compatibility of the Craft with Christianity, Judaism and the other great religions of the world to correct those elements which were either ill-considered or which might seem to dilute our faith or offend the religious sensibilities of members of the Craft.

We should certainly be concerned about the growing number of respected Christian denominations who have, in the wake of Knight's "revelations," adopted condemnations of our Fraternity. Our churches, although they no longer have the influence in society they once enjoyed, are most important in the life and for the family of the sort of man we wish every Mason to be. Every Mason who reads the reports of these concerned denominations, especially when it is his own denomination, if he takes his church and what it does or says seriously, will be moved to judge the validity of the criticisms of the Craft by his church. Each Mason who is a member of a church which denounces the Masonic Order must decide for himself whether or not an association that uniformly preaches friendship, truth, morality and brotherly love and practices those virtues, human nature being what it is, somewhat less uniformly is compatible with the fundamentals of his faith and the claims propounded by his particular denomination. Knight's accusations

are highly charged emotionally, and, human nature being what it is, a few Brethren within our ranks will be moved to leave.

As an ordained minister of the United Methodist Church, many of whose Bishops, ministers and other leaders are and have been members of the Craft, I feel that Freemasonry and Christianity are not only compatible, but that Freemasonry provides a practical means of putting into effect many of the great teachings of the Christian faith. I hope that Jewish and Muslim Brothers and those of other faiths feel the same about their religious and Masonic obligations and practices.

Is the criticism of Masonry justified? Have others whose vocation or avocation is religious leadership wondered about the meaning or significance of Masonic ritual and practice? Certainly Methodist, Episcopal and Presbyterian criticism of the Royal Arch ritual should not be rejected without examining the challenged portion to see if there is something to be corrected, not because it was criticized, but because, according to our own standards of reason, religion and Masonry, it should be corrected.

Americans and Britons will remember how difficult it was for the thirteen American colonies to obtain a serious and discerning hearing for their criticisms of their relationship to the Mother Country. In the heat of that communications effort, Patrick Henry said, "Caesar had his Brutus, Charles I had his Cromwell, and George III..." When the cries of "Treason" subsided, he continued, "And George III may profit from their example. History also reminds us of the shortsightedness of Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI, as well as the false security of Czar Nicholas II."

No Mason desires a conflict between his Craft and his church or synagogue. However, churches are composed of human beings and have the capacity to be wrong. They frequently exercise that capacity, by engaging in witch hunts, the slaughter of heretics and religious wars, to say nothing of the petty imperfections of individual persons and congregations.

We are, therefore, under no moral or logical compulsion to change anything just because a group of mortals, albeit a church, so decrees. However, we should not hesitate to amend our ritual, our rules or our accustomed practices where such amendment will bring us closer to the principles of Masonry or tend to make instruction in and the practice of Masonry more effective.

If the current controversy prompts us to a beneficially critical look at our ritual, they have done us a good turn. The questions raised have sent me back to Bible and books with the result that I feel very strongly that examination of our ritual and the assumptions upon which the ritual is built brings to light concepts which should be amended by Masonry itself, without regard to the approval or disapproval of others.

Rather than responding to the whole array of criticism of Masonry on religious grounds, let us take the one that generated much of the heat in recent debate, the ritual of the Royal Arch Degree. He contends that in the ritual, "The name of the Great Architect of the Universe is revealed as JAH-BUL-ON - not a general term open to any interpretation an individual Freemason might choose, but a precise supernatural being - compound deity composed of three separate personalities fused in one." (Ibid., p. I 236.)

Knight explains JAH-BUL-ON as follows: Jah (or Jahweh) is identified as the God of the Hebrews, Bul (or Baal) as the Canaanite fertility God, and On as the Egyptian god Osiris.

He quotes Albert Pike (1883) as saying, "No man or body of men can make me accept as a sacred word, in part composed of the name of an accursed and beastly heathen god, whose name has been for more than two thousand years an appellation of the Devil." (Ibid., pp. 236 f).

The Church of England echoed Knight's contentions with the headline, "Aspects of Masonic ritual condemned as blasphemous." (Church Times, London: G. J. Palmer & Sons, No. 6488, p. 1). The working group appointed to study Freemasonry for the General

Synod concluded, *inter alia*, "that JAHBULON, the name or description of God which appears in all the rituals is blasphemous." (Ibid). They contended that the name of God must not be taken in vain or combined with those of pagan deities. Their data and conclusions are both mistaken, but they do suggest an area for careful appraisal by Royal Arch Masons.

The principal objections, by Biblical and historical standards, to our present practice in Royal Arch Masonry are set forth below.

1. Matters of Fact: The ritual states that Jab, Red and On are the name of Deity in Syriac, Chaldean and Egyptian. This is not true. It would be more accurate to say that Jah, Bel and On are thought to be the names of Syriac, Chaldean and Egyptian gods, but even this conclusion is inaccurate, as described below.

- a. Syriac: There is no evidence to suggest that Syriac existed at the time of the rebuilding of the Temple. Syriac is an Aramaic dialect used in Edessa (north of Mesopotamia and a sometime Crusader dominion) and in western Mesopotamia. "It was similar to, but not identical with, the Aramaic dialect used in Palestine during the time of Jesus and his apostles." (The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, New York: Abingdon Press, 1962, Vol. 4, p. 754a). The earliest written Syriac, fragments of the New Testament, dates from the 2nd Century A.D., the earliest Syriac Old Testament was written in the 3rd Century A.D.).

In contrast with Syriac, the use of Aramaic as a colloquial language was acquired by Jewish exiles and would have been widely known at the time of rebuilding the Temple. Nehemiah 8:8, "So they read in the book of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading," may refer to an Aramaic paraphrase of the Hebrew Scriptures. (Ibid., Vol. 4, p. 749a.)

"Jah" does not appear in the Bible except as a prefix or suffix, is the preliterate name of God used by the southern Hebrew tribes, and at the time of the rebuilding of the Temple the term was well-established as a Hebrew abbreviation of the name of the Covenant Deity. It is not the name of Deity in the Syriac language.

- b. Chaldee: The once powerful Babylonian Empire had been crushed by the time of the rebuilding of the Temple. The survivors were called Chaldeans. In the Chaldean language, Bel or Baal, from the Akkadian root belu, means "he who possesses, subdues or rules," and always refers to Marduk, the state-god of Babylon. Bel is the Mesopotamian equivalent of the Canaanitish God, Baal, the principal god of the indigenous Palestinians at the time of rebuilding the Temple. Because of its bitter religious and social connotations, Bel cannot have been used to refer to Deity by our Companions who rebuilt the Temple. (Vide *ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 376.; Cf. B. Davidson, *Analytic Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon*, London: Samuel Bagster, n.d., 1963, p. 85.)
- c. Egyptian: The use of On in our ritual is probably based on Genesis 41:45, 50 and 46:20 which refer to Asenath, wife of Joseph and daughter of Potipherah, "priest of On." Apparently, the author or authors of the ritual understood the "On" in these passages to refer to an Egyptian god, On. Instead, On, in Egyptian, means Sun. The Egyptians did not call the Sun god On. In the Old Kingdom Re was the sun god. In later syncretism, the term was Amon-Re. A major effort at monotheism was made, about 1375 B.C., by Pharaoh Amenhotep IV, who changed his name to Akh-en-Aton and concentrated worship in Aton, the sun disc. The failure of the effort is reflected by the change of the name of Pharaoh Tut-ankh-Aton to Tut-ankh-Amon.

In the Biblical passages quoted, "On" is a place name, an Egyptian city whose better-known Greek name is Heliopolis. The less familiar Hebrew equivalent is Beth-shemesh. However, it is important to note that in the Septuagint, the

translation (285-245 B.C.) of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek, the Tetragrammaton of Exodus 3:14 is translated into a Greek word pronounced "hown." This Greek word can be literally translated, "Being," and itself gives scope to much interesting interpretation.

2. Historical Setting: At the rebuilding of the Temple, which we commemorate in the Royal Arch degree, the strife between Israel and her neighbors was intense. This fact is commemorated in the ritual of Cryptic Masonry where, based on Nehemiah 4:13-22, the builders of Zerubbabel's Temple are described as using a sword for defense and a trowel for construction. It is inconceivable that our ancient Companions would have engaged in a ceremony using the words, Jah, Bel and On, however innocent such practice might seem in our enlightened age.

To a large degree, the Old Testament, especially the writings of the Prophets, is a history of the conflict to keep the identity and worship of God clearly defined and free from contamination with pagan contamination. The Prophets made the choice clear. On one hand was (and is) the unseen monotheistic God of Israel (honored in the Shema, "Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord...," Deuteronomy 6:4.) and whose name was too holy to be pronounced. Opposing were the pagan gods, tangible, fabricated and dominated by their human creators and transported like baggage (Isaiah 46). Isaiah reminds us, "Remember this and consider, recall it to mind, you transgressors, remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is none like me...." (Isaiah 46:8,9). Without doubt, the use of Jah-Bel-On would have been far more offensive to our ancient Brothers and Companions at the rebuilding of the Temple than it may be to our present critics. In a word, they would have been horrified.

Admittedly, early Hebrews appropriated the word Baal, meaning "lord" or "owner", as a name of Deity, in spite of its ascription by their enemies to the Canaanitish god of storm and fertility. Saul named a son Esh-baal, meaning "Man of Baal," (I Chronicles 8:33 and 9:39) and David named a child Beeliada, meaning "Baal knows." (I Chronicles 14:7).

Significantly, Eshbaal's name was changed to Ishbosheth (Man of Shame), (2 Samuel 2:8 et seq.) and David changed the name of the child to Eliada, "God knows" (2 Samuel 5:16). It was difficult for prophets, such as Elijah, to draw a line between Yahweh and Baal in the minds of the populace. Especially under the leadership of highly placed Baal worshipers such as Queen Jezebel, many actually abandoned Yahweh. By the time of the Prophets, Baal and his worship were anathema to orthodox Jewish leaders.

The irreconcilable strife between Jah, Jahweh or Jehovah and Baal or Bel may best be illustrated by the contest on Mt. Carmel between Elijah (note the Jab in his name) and the priests of Baal (I Kings 18), and by the denunciations of the Book of Hosea.

At the time of rebuilding the Temple, the conflict between the Companions who worshiped Yahweh and the worshipers of Baal was, at best, intermittent warfare. Our ancient Companions, who rebuilt the Temple and whom we seek to emulate, could not be comfortable with our ritual. Similarly, the Companions of the Grand Chapter of England have eliminated all references to pagan deities from their ritual. Let us see if the critics of Freemasonry respond with equivalent understanding, tolerance and consideration.