

Freemasonry – An Introduction

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Of the many questions asked about Freemasonry, there are four which are most common. Following are concise answers to those four questions which will assist those enquiring about the Masonic fraternity, and be useful to Freemasons when they are asked about the Craft.

1. What is Freemasonry?

This question usually elicits a variety of responses from Freemasons including a tendency to answer in the negative, that is to say, we begin listing those things that Freemasonry is not: “It is not a religion, charity, secret society, or social club.”

A more traditional answer may be offered such as “Freemasonry is a peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory and illuminated by symbols.”¹ Or it might be explained in poetic or rhetorical terms: “Freemasonry is an activity of closely united men who . . . work for the welfare of mankind, striving morally to ennoble themselves and others and thereby bring about a universal league of mankind.”² Or, “[Freemasons are] a group of men who enjoy sharing the virtues of honesty, morality, integrity, and tolerance.”³

While these responses are interesting and correct, they do not address the question directly by acknowledging that Freemasonry is a system of principles governing human moral and ethical conduct. As such, Freemasonry is a philosophy.⁴

2. What Is the Philosophy of Freemasonry?

This second question elicits many different responses, some of which are quite confused, and often describing a Freemason’s idealized character, or the objectives of Freemasonry, such as “making good men better.” However, the philosophy is one of moral standards of conduct and it is based on five principles.

i) It includes a belief in the existence of a Supreme Being.⁵ This belief is deemed to be either conducive to, or supportive of, moral and ethical conduct.

ii) The philosophy embraces the Golden Rule,⁶ an ancient guide to moral conduct. It was introduced to humankind in the axial period (900BCE to 200 BCE) in different parts of the world. The Golden Rule was advocated by Zoroaster in the sixth century BCE in Persia, and may have had much earlier roots in Babylonian religion. It was expressed in the negative: “That nature alone is good which shall not do to another whatever is not good for its own self.”⁷ It was also taught by the Buddha⁸ in the sixth century BCE, by Mahavira in Jainism⁹ in the same century, by Confucius¹⁰ in the same century, by Rabbi Hillel in Palestine in the first century BCE¹¹ and by Jesus¹² in the first century CE.

iii) The philosophy embraces the four cardinal virtues, namely, temperance, prudence (wisdom), fortitude and justice,¹³ which were espoused by Greek philosophers including Pythagoras, Plato¹⁴ and Aristotle.¹⁵ It was thought that the contemplation and application of these qualities would lead to a virtuous life and a participation in divinity.¹⁶ They were later addressed by St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas to become an influential component of Western philosophy.

iv) The Masonic philosophy advocates self-enlightenment:

The study of the liberal arts . . . which tends to polish and adorn the mind, is earnestly recommended to your consideration . . .¹⁷

. . . but Freemasonry . . . having a nobler object in view, namely, the cultivation and the improvement of the human mind . . .¹⁸

Our meetings are intended to cultivate and enlighten the mind . . .¹⁹

Prudence is the essential component of enlightenment in that it is mainly comprised of knowledge.²⁰ Knowledge is requisite to the development of understanding and truth which may then lead to the attainment of wisdom.

v) The philosophy incorporates the ancient drama of initiation. Initiation rites are transformational events that mark a transition from one condition to another and provide recognition of a new role, responsibility, mythology or state.²¹

. . . the purpose and actual effect of these [rituals] was to conduct people across the difficult thresholds of transformation that demand a change in the patterns not only of conscious but also of unconscious life.²²

Rites of passage including birth, naming, puberty, marriage, and burial, involve ceremonies where patterns and attachments of the previous stage are left behind.²³ Initiation rites typically include rituals of separation, ordeals, death and resurrection. During the "burial" time, the initiate may reflect on the past and begin to contemplate the future from the grave.

He will also receive instruction which allows the new person to emerge more fully into life after having experienced a sense of death.²⁴

Evidence of burial rites extends back 200,000 years to the Neanderthal period;²⁵ and the Paleolithic caves of France and Spain of 30,000 years ago were the rite sanctuaries for initiations to manhood.²⁶ From cave to long house, temple, church, and private clubs, initiation ceremonies have opened men and women to the life of the spirit, and prepared them for a fuller participation in their culture.²⁷ Through the initiation ceremony, Masonic lodges provide an instructional drama designed to open the mind to the pursuit of knowledge, truth, wisdom and moral conduct under God.

3. What Are Freemasons?

Freemasons are a fraternity, an order, or a society, with a philosophy of ethical and moral conduct. The origin of the organization is found in both the temple schools of three millennia ago and the ancient trades societies. Plato said that the Mysteries (temple schools) "were established by men of great genius who, in the early stages, strove to teach purity, to ameliorate the cruelty of the race, to redefine its manners and morals, and to restrain society by stronger bonds than those which human laws impose."²⁸ And Plutarch has provided what

may be the earliest reference to trades societies:

Among King Numa's (king of Rome, 715 – 672 BCE) other administrative measures, it was his partitioning of the population according to trades that is especially acclaimed . . . flute players, goldsmiths, carpenters, dyers, shoemakers, leather finishers, coppersmiths and potters were all separated into occupational divisions. By grouping the rest of the trades together he formed a single body out of all their members. And he gave them social activities, assemblies and religious rituals appropriate for each body.²⁹

These ancient organizations were founded to preserve, develop, and transmit knowledge within a moral framework which would promote civility and improve society. Their influence survived throughout the Roman period, the Middle Ages, and the modern era. Today's Freemasons preserve the same values and retain as their mission the transmission of those values to their respective societies throughout the world.

When the spirit of this order has its way upon the earth . . . society will be a vast league of sympathy and justice, business a system of human service, law a rule of beneficence; the home will be more holy, the laughter of childhood more joyous and the temple of prayer mortised and tenoned in simple faith.³⁰

4. What Do Freemasons Do?

Freemasons initiate candidates into the lodge and provide opportunities for self-development through educational presentations, workshops, leadership opportunities, charitable and social activities. While the initiation process described above addresses the mind and spirit, there are practical experiences available in the lodge which develop major social skills. The series of lodge management positions offers serious, non-threatening opportunities for progressive leadership development. New tasks and procedures are learned. From listening skills and communication to public speaking and parliamentary procedure, the entire range of management functions is addressed. Organization, coordination, motivation, cooperation, teamwork and diplomacy may be learned and practiced in a supportive environment. This multi-layered training experience encourages maturity and provides personal growth intended to enrich one's life and the lives of those around him, both at home and in the community.

Endnotes

1. Tim Dedopulos, *The Brotherhood: Inside The Secret World Of The Freemasons*, (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2006), 7. Also, Ceremony For Investing The Officers Of A Lodge, (Grand Lodge Of Alberta, 1993), 31.
2. Dedopulos, 13.
3. Quoted from a wallet card issued by the Grand Lodge of Arizona.
4. Christopher Hodapp, *Freemasons For Dummies*, (Indianapolis: Wiley Publishing Inc., 2005), 13.
5. *The Work*. (The Grand Lodge Of Alberta, 1999). 47; Hodapp, 13-14.
6. *Ibid.*, 84; Hodapp, 56.
7. Edward Burns, *Western Civilization*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., Vol. 1, 7th ed., 1968), 90 - 91.

8. Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation, The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 287.
9. *Ibid.*, 243.
10. *Ibid.*, 208.
11. *Ibid.*, 379.
12. Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31.
13. *The Work*, p. 85 (1st Degree Charge). Also, *Ceremony For Investing The Officers Of A Lodge*, (Grand Lodge Of Alberta, 1993), 33 (General Charge).
14. Will Durant, *The Age Of Faith*, (New York: Simon And Schuster, 1950), 820.
15. www.hyoomik.com/ethics/cardinalvirtues.html. This site provides a discussion of the four cardinal virtues.
16. Durant, 655.
17. *The Work*, 121.
18. *Ceremony For Investing The Officers Of A Lodge*, 31.
19. *Ibid.*, 32.
20. www.hyoomik.com/ethics/cardinalvirtues.html, 2.
21. Joseph Campbell, *The Power Of Myth*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), 14-15.
22. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2nd Ed., 1968), 10.
23. *Ibid.* 10.
24. Mircea Eliade, *Rites And Symbols Of Initiation*, (Putnam Connecticut: Spring Publications, 1958), xxii.
25. Campbell, *Primitive Mythology: The Masks of God*, (New York: Penguin Group, 1991), 67.
26. *Ibid.* 66.
27. Eliade, 3.
28. Plato, *Phaedo*. Quoted by Joseph Fort Newton, *The Builders*, (Richmond: Macoy Publishing and Masonic Supply Co., 1951), 46-47.
29. John W. Humphrey, John P. Oleson and Andrew N. Sherwood, *Greek And Roman Technology: A Sourcebook*, (London: Routledge, 1998), 498.
30. Joseph Fort Newton, *The Men's House*, (Richmond: Macoy Publishing Masonic Supply Co. Inc., 1923), 33.