

Brethren, consider the word “god”.

When spoken, the word is merely a sonic vessel that journeys from mouth to ear. It is devoid of any real definition; for it is a series of vibrations that are meaningless in its core state. While the word may hold a significant meaning to the sender, its path is one of predictable physical laws that have no special instructions save for the trajectory of the wave. Vibrations beget patterns; patterns beget sound; and sound begets the word.

What gives the word meaning are the constructs that we as individuals attach to it. We imbue it with a deep and symbolic knowledge that represents our relationship and connection to Deity, whom we, as petitioners, profess as a prerequisite to acceptance in the Fraternity.

Now, consider the word “belief”.

The relationship between man and God is intensely personal and wholly unique. While there may be millions of adherents following a well-defined and regimented set of beliefs, each personal relationship stands on its own. Taken individually, personal gnosis is as varied as the droplets of snow falling from the heavens. Moving in harmony, these diverse beliefs drift downward, taking root on all receptive surfaces. Thus, each unique crystal unites on the level, creating a landscape that is uniform in its coverage and pristine in its beauty.

If we use the metaphor of an ice crystal falling from the heavens, is it possible to determine its validity based on a unique shape? Are we not instructed to look beyond the outer trappings of an individual to see the spark of Divinity that resides within us all?

In every Masonic Temple, a volume of sacred law rests in the center of the lodge, representing light to not only the candidate, but to every Brother who takes the message of universality into his heart as instructed in the Middle Chamber. Upon the Altar, where the Volume of Sacred Law resides, there is room for other beliefs. We see it when the Koran, Tanakh, Gita or any other Volume lay open beside it. More importantly, we see the essence of Divinity and the power of belief reflected in the eyes of our Brothers each time they are brought to light.

How then do we define acceptable belief? Better yet, should such a concept exist?

The Masonic precedent is quite clear; Dr. Albert Mackey, the great Masonic scholar and compiler of the 25 Landmarks which many Grand Lodges have adopted as their rules of regularity, wrote: “A belief in the existence of God as the GRAND ARCHITECT of the universe is one of the most important Landmarks of the Order.”¹

This declaration puts forth that belief in God, not membership of a belief system, qualifies a prospective candidate for the mysteries of Freemasonry. This principle is fortified by the omission of religion in the landmark and further elucidated in other

¹Albert G. Mackey, *A Textbook of Masonic Jurisprudence* (New York: Clark and Maynard Publishers, 1872), 32.

writings, which categorically state that a multitude of beliefs are acceptable within the Masonic institution. Like all inspired men, Mackey fully understood that while God can be viewed in a universal light, the methods of worship will naturally vary from culture to culture. Words like monotheism, polytheism or pantheism do not make an appearance in the landmarks. These are interpretations that have been introduced from time to time by Brothers, who, for any number of reasons, have opted to lay their working tools aside and unproductively focus their energy on the perceived “blemishes” of their brethren.

Some of these Brothers may point out that the traditions and landmarks are based in antiquity; and that the rise of belief systems that are foreign to theirs were not carefully examined or did not exist during the Victorian era where Masonic scholarship and literature flourished in the US and Britain. Despite this erroneous belief, modern Masonic voices continued to reaffirm the long held tradition of tolerance and acceptance with regard to belief. As recently as 1993, the Masonic Service Association of North America, who supplies many services to the Grand Lodges in the United States, stated:

“Masons believe that there is one God and that people employ many different ways to seek, and to express what they know of God. Masonry primarily uses the appellation, "Grand Architect of the Universe," and other non-sectarian titles, to address the Deity. In this way, persons of different faiths may join together in prayer, concentrating on God, rather than differences among themselves. Masonry believes in religious freedom and that the relationship between the individual and God is personal, private, and sacred.”²

There are many other instances in the volumes of Masonic literature, as well as in the teachings of the Masonic institution itself that firmly state that personal belief should be held in the highest respect and acceptance. Thus, if the belief in a Supreme Being stands above and beyond methods of worship; then methods of worship are above rebuke. It is this longstanding tolerance that has been essential in creating better men of the votaries who have taken the teachings of this institution to heart.

Why then is it necessary to write about matters that have should have been put to rest long ago? Perhaps it is that even in these enlightened times the inviolate is still subject to “well meaning” Brothers who have looked away from the designs on the trestle board that lay unfinished before them. We encounter such Brothers from time to time and try to whisper good counsel to help them along in their spiritual progression. Some are receptive and open, while others simply close their ears and hearts. Should one choose to be closed off from spiritual truth, one denies himself the opportunity to grow. However, when one is in a position of authority and opts to look away from spiritual truth, one is capable of causing great harm to the Brothers they superintend.

In December, the Grand Master of Florida issued a ruling and decision that prohibited specific belief systems or practices. Accordingly, Florida Brethren who identified themselves as adherents of these belief systems have been forced to resign or face

²MSANA; [Statement on Freemasonry and Religion](#) (Masonic Service Association of North America, Dec. 1993). Web. 22 Jan. 2013.

expulsion from Masonry. The practices prohibited include: Paganism, Wicca, Odinism, Deism, Gnosticism and Agnosticism.

To the average person, these belief systems are mysterious and viewed with varying degrees of suspicion and fear. They have been sensationalized, maligned and misconstrued by parties who often seek to gain from their demonization or trivialization from a monetary or societal control perspective. Whether it comes from the bully pulpit, the printing press or the silver screen, few belief systems have ever withstood the sustained onslaught of misinformation and prejudice that these unique faiths have endured for centuries.

Brethren, we are encouraged to study and educate ourselves about the world we live in. Our task is not to be average, but to erect an edifice of character that is symmetrical and harmonious in its parts. For centuries, enlightened Brothers have taken this principle to heart, publishing volumes of literature devoted to ethics, tolerance, morality and faith. By examination of the literature, we see that Paganism has been described as “A general appellation for the religious worship of the whole human race, except of that portion which has embraced Christianity, Judaism, or Mohammedanism.”³ Taking this Victorian description at face value, we see that Masonry has validated “non-traditional” beliefs for well over a century. We count among our ranks Brethren who are Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh or Parsi all of which are “accepted” faiths in both the US and abroad. Who will tell them – or their respective Grand Lodges -- that their beliefs have now been deemed incompatible with Freemasonry as defined by the Grand Lodge of Florida?

Paganism, which by Masonic definition includes Wicca, Odinism, as well as the established non-Abrahamic Eastern religions mentioned earlier, has never been addressed in an exclusionary light. The body of literature demonstrates that Masonic scholars treat all religion with respect and reverence; and we are exhorted to do the same as part of our Blue Lodge degree work. Brother Manly Hall acknowledges the universality of religion and the source of Divine Light that is present in all by writing: "The true Mason is not creed bound. He realizes with the divine illumination of his lodge that as a Mason his religion must be universal: Christ, Buddha or Mohammed, the name means little, for he recognizes only the light and not the bearer."⁴ Hall further asserts that tolerance is not just a virtue, that it is a spiritual duty that must be practiced in deed and word: “He worships at every shrine, bows before every altar, whether in temple, mosque or cathedral, realizing with his truer understanding the oneness of all spiritual truth.”⁵

As Freemasons, the diversity of belief is deeply entrenched in our history, ritual, obligations and signs of recognition. King Solomon, a descendent of the Abrahamic faiths, sought out and relied upon Pagans in every aspect of the building of the Temple. His workers included Tyrian and Sidonian citizens. As subjects of Hiram of Tyre, they practiced Pagan rites and worshipped Pagan Gods, as was the custom for their culture.

³ Albert G. Mackey, *Encyclopedia Of Freemasonry And Its Kindred Sciences* (New York: Masonic History Company, 1919), 541.

⁴ Manly P. Hall, *The Lost Keys of Freemasonry* (New York: Penguin Group Inc, 2006), 64

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Many were members the Fraternity of Dionysian Artificers, who are associated with the Doric and Ionic Orders that are alluded to as part of the winding stairs in the Middle Chamber. Our history and ritual is rich with Pagan symbolism and subjects, which clearly illustrates that the font of wisdom did not suddenly start flowing 2000 years ago in a small region in Southwestern Asia. Our roots extend well before that time and touch many different countries and schools of thought, culminating in a divine tapestry of beliefs that came together to build the very institution that we labor in today.

The practices and religions that are now prohibited in Florida share many similarities with the Abrahamic faiths with the exception of Agnosticism, which actually does not belong in the belief category. Agnosticism is a viewpoint that posits the ultimate answer to the existence of God is unknowable. It is a secondary characteristic of belief; therefore, it is possible to meet an Agnostic Theist, who believes in a supreme being, but will not claim that such a deity exists and an Agnostic Atheist, who does not believe in deity and asserts that the existence of God is impossible to prove.

Deism is perhaps the most puzzling entry on the prohibited list. Its very name denotes a monotheistic belief system; one that posits that there is one true and ever lasting God and that the soul is immortal. The major difference between Deism and the Abrahamic faiths is that Deism states that God does not superintend the daily activities of mankind; rather, God allows the natural world to run according to natural law. They reject atheism, believing that reason and observation are sufficient enough to qualify the presence of God. In Masonic literature, Deism is examined and passes the necessary requirements as an acceptable belief system: 'Deism presents no disqualification for initiation. An atheist would be rejected, but none would now be refused admission on religious grounds who subscribed to the dogmas of a belief in God and a resurrection to eternal life.'⁶

It is also noteworthy to point out that the United States owes a great deal to Deists; many of whom contributed their extraordinary talents and wisdom as architects of this country. While there were many Deists who were Freemasons, three stand out prominently for their efforts as Founding Fathers. One could only imagine how Brothers George Washington and Benjamin Franklin would look upon the Masonic institution today, knowing that their sacred beliefs were now deemed incompatible.

As for the remainder of prohibited beliefs, they all acknowledge the immortality of the soul and a belief in a supreme being. The concept of the Supreme Being may differ from belief to belief; with some following a duotheistic model that actually emanates from one source and others following a polytheistic or pantheistic model. Despite the differences, when looking at the landmarks, Freemasonry demands a belief in a Supreme Being only. Regardless of the differing theisms, the nature of their belief systems is compatible with Masonry. Finally, each belief system has established sets of virtues and morals that are geared to the higher aspirations of man as well as their spiritual evolution.

⁶ Albert G. Mackey, *Encyclopedia Of Freemasonry And Its Kindred Sciences* (New York: Masonic History Company, 1914), 211 - 212.

Given the body of Masonic literature, as well as the lessons imparted by this unique course of moral instruction, it becomes evident that we are not defined by our religious or spiritual practices; rather, we are defined by our character and by our work. While spiritual beliefs may augment or act as a catalyst in our path, it is ultimately the small, still inner voice that guides us on our quest towards improvement and self mastery. That inner voice is an expression of the Divine, which we, as Freemasons, recognize and accept as the genesis of individual belief. From this acceptance springs the great lesson of tolerance; for with tolerance comes the wisdom to acknowledge that the light in others does not diminish the light within you.

Thus, when a Mason takes the lesson of belief into his heart, he comes to an understanding that the Grand Architect of the Universe expects nothing less of His votaries than a spiritual design that works in full harmony with all of his creations; one that honors all who journey, regardless of the path that leads them to light. Accordingly, one of the greatest sins committed against God, neighbor and self occurs when one gives in to base emotions and no longer looks to the Divine Spark within; for once a Brother chooses to see “spiritual imperfections” in others and acts in a manner based on pride, ego or fear, he has effectively rejected belief and cast a black cube against his own relationship with God.

How then shall we define acceptable belief in modern Freemasonry? The answer to this is very clear: "To every Mason there is a God", wrote Brother Albert Pike, " How, or by what intermediate Powers or Emanations He creates and acts, and in what way He unfolds and manifests Himself, Masonry leaves to Creeds and Religions to inquire."⁷ Although this was written well over 100 years ago, it is just as relevant today. Masonry is not a religion; it is an organization that uses ageless wisdom and spiritual truths from a variety of diverse cultures. It works in concert with all religions and only requires belief in a Supreme Being. Therefore, the Masonic Institution does not define “acceptable” belief; rather, it simply accepts belief and leaves it into the hands of the individual to pursue in the manner they see fit, according to the dictates of their own conscience.

⁷ Albert Pike, *Morals and Dogma of the Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry* (Charleston: Supreme Council of the Thirty Third Degree for the Southern Jurisdiction of The United States, 1871), 524.