

A MODERN RE-STATEMENT OF FREEMASONRY

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INTRODUCTION

Freemasonry is a modern institution, founded on ancient human beliefs. It is not amenable to simple statements, characteristic of 'modern' definitions, and is best begun to be understood when it is experienced. Beyond personal experience and study, Freemasonry is:

- most comprehensible as a 'social movement' founded upon the radical ideal of "Universal Brotherhood";
- and, best understood in terms of its ideals, history and practice;

as it addresses the two questions besetting humanity since antiquity. Namely: What constitutes a morally good and flourishing life? What are the best possible social arrangements for achieving a morally good and flourishing life?

Historically, Freemasonry has sought to initiate and influence men in addressing these questions because, prior to the modern post-1960's influence of feminism, social patriarchy privileged the role of men within the public realm. Whilst the practice of Freemasonry has been, and remains, exclusive of men it has always been ideologically inclusive of women and non-masons because it is from within general society that good people, and good citizens, men and women, are developed. Accordingly, Charity is the virtue by which Freemasonry externalizes its beliefs and practices within society and to a transcendent "common good".

THE HISTORICAL SOURCES OF FREEMASONRY

Contemporary freemasonry is best understood in terms of its transformation from "Operative Masonry" to "Speculative Freemasonry" as it was influenced by:

- The philosophy and history of the Renaissance (1400-1600 CE), the Enlightenment (1700-1900 CE), and Modernity (2000-2100);
- The ideas (i.e. epistemology & ideology) drawn from antiquity and incorporated into Renaissance and Enlightenment thinking.
- The political developments (i.e. Liberal-Democracy, freedom, equality) of Modernity.

The rejection of religious dogma and the divine right of monarchs, and the development of humanism, rationalism, and scientific reasoning were key themes of the Renaissance and Enlightenment, and have led to the many assumptions, forgotten, or 'taken for granted' by those of us living in the 20th and 21st century. Whereas the pre-modern world, was once regarded as "enchanted" (i.e. controlled by spirits and superstition, and those who could control these unseen forces), it is now a modern world largely based on scientific and technological knowledge (i.e. empiricism and observation), but retaining unknown *mystery* or *mysteries* which spiritual and religious beliefs continue to provide meaningful explanation of.

Contemporary Freemasonry is known as "Speculative Freemasonry". It appears to have developed from about 1600 CE, thus spanning the Renaissance, Enlightenment and Modernity, and to have (curiously) evolved from "Operative Freemasonry". The reasons for this fusion between Operative and Speculative Freemasonry are not clear, because Freemasonry was largely an 'oral culture' until the 18th Century (hence its emphasis upon ritual). Without written records, much is left to historical

study or interpretations of ritual. The key point is that the fusion of Operative and Speculative Freemasonry was linked to the ideological changes of the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Speculative Freemasonry evolved as an institution in which men who were interested in progressive ideas and social change, joined for the purpose of furthering that discourse AND developing men who might live to those ideas in their private endeavors.

In the famous words of John Locke, life was *nasty, brutish and short*, and the Speculative Freemasons (who were probably the emerging middle class), were motivated to improve that by supporting Renaissance and Enlightenment values. Central to this was the idea of 'Universal Brotherhood', shaped within a fraternal society undivided by the religious, political and class divisions, which were dividing general society.

Although it is unclear as to why Speculative Freemasonry evolved from Operative Masonry, the legacy of Operative Masonry is evident today. The Operative Masons were the stonemasons who had formed themselves into Guilds during the Middle Ages. Stonemasons travelled across Europe – the universal world of their culture at that time - and the Guilds operated as institutions of professional training, accreditation and hospitality. As skilled workers, the Stonemasons held ceremonies of initiation and passages of rite. Castles and cathedrals were their primary objects of construction and their work assumed sacred status because of its purpose and the knowledge of their trade – mathematics and physics.

The Operative Freemason's work, and guild practices, were legitimated by a meta-narrative linking them to King Solomon and the building of the First Temple. With their meta-narrative situated in the Old Testament, Operative Freemasons also identified with the ideas of antiquity (i.e. Egypt, Rome and Greece). Consequently, Speculative Freemasonry adapted and adopted some of the key elements of Operative Freemasonry within the moral teachings of its ceremonial practice with the objective of developing wise men imbued with a sense of wisdom. This fusion between Operative and Speculative Freemasonry was significantly aided by the Renaissance which returned to the ideas of antiquity in order to assert the primacy of human creativity and autonomy within a divinely created world.

THE PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE OF FREEMASONRY – THE UNIVERSAL & NOT THE PARTICULAR

As is clear from the brief history provided above, Freemasonry takes a long, universal and cross-cultural, view of human development and seeks to understand the 'universal truths' about our human nature and social order. It is therefore intrinsically eclectic and is variously regarded as a philosophy, psychology, or ethical framework of life. In modern language Freemasonry is often described as a spirituality, though it claims not to be a religion –even though it offers a religious experience – because its concern is not the supernatural cause of life or the afterlife.

At its simplest, I believe Freemasonry is best understood as offering a philosophy of life – with a particular focus on our common moral identity. I specifically use the word 'offer' because Freemasonry repudiates dogma. Freemasonry offers to impart the universal principles, learned from long human experience, which will enable men to lead a good and flourishing life. That is their quest – a 'secret' only they can find. Freemasonry does not direct men on the particulars of their good and flourishing life. It seeks to develop men's moral conscience through formal ceremonies and informal social interaction. These are the two primary strategies of Freemasonry.

There are 3 mandatory degrees in Freemasonry and many beyond. The first 3 degrees, constituting 'Craft Freemasonry', are:

- Entered Apprentice; The first degree, the degree of initiation, which introduces that Candidate to the foundational "Cardinal Virtues" of a good moral character. Within the scheme of the 3 degrees, this is a degree of 'purification'. Its initiatic purpose is to teach the candidate that morally good men are governed by the cardinal moral virtues and not unrestrained self-ego or individualism. Reasoned and rational consideration of the Cardinal Virtues, not emotionalism, is the basis of Virtue. The Entered Apprentice degree is the foundation stone of a morally good character. The Entered Apprentice is exhorted to make 'a daily advancement' in consciously developing his moral character, having regard to the cardinal virtues.
- Fellowcraft; The second degree, the degree of passing, which introduces the idea that developing his mental capacities – knowledge & reasoning – is the second step of developing his moral character. Drawn from the age of classical learning, Freemasonry values men who develop a broad understanding of the social and natural universe they inhabit with their fellow creatures. Multi-disciplinary knowledge, theoretical and practical, is the aspiration of the morally good man and the classical "Liberal Arts and Sciences" are the acknowledged source of this. Epistemology changes over time, as 'knowledge' develops, and the Liberal Arts and Sciences therefore function as a metaphor to encourage Freemasons to pursue a broad social education, regardless of their professional, technical or scientific, expertise. An integrated world view – worldliness – should designate a Freemason.
- Master Mason; The third degree, the degree of raising, introduces the Candidate to the idea that his personal faith (i.e. spiritual identity), combined with the virtuousness and mental development encouraged by the 1st and 2nd degree, will develop his insight and guide his conscience, so that he acts as a morally good man, ever seeking wisdom. As the culminating degree, of Craft Freemasonry he is recognized as having the skills for his daily moral renewal, to be enjoined with other Master Masons in this quest, and to guide and instruct Fellowcraft and Entered Apprentice Freemason's in their quest.

Each degree amounts to a specific ceremony, based upon set ritual which is usually learned and delivered by memory, set in a Lodge Room depicting King Solomon's Temple. The ritual and symbolism is drawn from antiquity to the Renaissance and Enlightenment and, to the inexperienced, is all quite strange. In classic initiatic tradition, the purpose of this 'strangeness' is to disrupt the Candidates accustomed cognitive processing with a new experience and to establish new and deeper insights.

Operating in an exclusive oral tradition, counter-cultural to the 21st century, each Lodge ceremony endeavors to stimulate insight through 'the head and heart' – not just the rationalism of mind which is the dominant mode of secular cognition. It is unlikely that any Candidate fully understands these experiences. It is only by repeated exposure, discussion with brethren and study, that the moral teachings are discerned by the Candidate. In that sense, and the sense of the 3 degrees, Freemasonry is a 'progressive science' of moral and social development.

The reality is that few Freemason's proceed through the degrees and attain that which the degree aspires to. The idea of the degree is that, through the symbolism, ritual and knowledge imparted, they are provided with an experience which introduces them to the principles of their self-development and, most essentially, that they make an ongoing commitment for their self-

development to their 'brother's'. Much of the 'secrecy' of Freemasonry relates to honoring these undertakings and relationships and to maintaining the confidentiality of the ceremony so that its effect upon successive Candidates is not diminished.

Consistent with the theme of ongoing development, each Lodge meeting (which has a ceremonial function), is followed by a Festive Board. Although formalities are involved, this is largely where informal engagement occurs as 'brothers'. Within the total scheme of Freemasonry, the Festive Board is where men become familiar with a diversity of other men – their natures, their skills, their achievements. It is a place of informal learning, exchange and relationship, about personal and social matters – anything other than religion and politics.

The Festive Board is a place of 'fraternity'. Its unqualified openness is because each brother is united in their commitment to being a morally good man, living in harmony with other men, and this is based upon the shared experience of the 3 degrees – a key experience each brother has in common with each other.

The commitment to each other is not confined to Lodge meetings or Festive Boards. Brothers may voluntarily help another, where they identify the need, or a Brother may seek the help of another.

CONCLUSION - THE IDEAL MASONIC CANDIDATE.

Speculative Freemasonry is no longer motivated by the radical social forces of the Renaissance or Enlightenment. Its Enlightenment social narrative, or nurturing of the Liberal Democratic or Nation State, has receded and this no doubts contributes to its membership decline.

External forces aside, Speculative Freemasonry is a public institution which remains powerfully relevant to the 21st Century because of its moral focus on 'truth, relief and charity', the practical fostering of universal moral virtues through fraternity, and the multi-cultural uniting of Australian men in Universal Brotherhood.

We are living in an age where our social cohesion is fraying because the absence of belief, trust and otherness. Violence, poverty, aimlessness and loneliness are its social symptoms.

Freemasonry is a well-established system which promotes the development of moral virtues and fraternity amongst men – for the benefit of society of large. Understood correctly, it provides continuity with our past (i.e. a lens to understand the historical world shaping our current world), a source of personal meaning and identity, and the optimism to influence social outcomes – personally or collaboratively.

Its target should be men who are intellectually curious and have reached a stage and capacity of life, when they are not driven by the needs of material survival, but want to engage with their spiritual and moral identity and like-minded men to shape a social legacy better than the one currently evident.

Ultimately, Freemasonry cherishes pragmatic idealists. Men prepared to work together – not passively – in harmony for the good of 'a greater good'. Its faith is in the moral goodness of men to work together practically and for social good and it leaves each man's spiritual or religious faith for him to determine.
