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Defining Freemasonry; Tradition Becomes Practical

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Setting aside all discussion of Ancient Landmarks and uniformity of ritual the question still remains: Are physical requirements essential to Freemasonry? To answer that question requires some thought as to what is Freemasonry? Why and how did it become speculative or philosophical from an operative origin and what has enabled it to survive?

To answer the question what is Freemasonry, we must believe that it is a fraternal Society that performs a function without which man cannot survive, without which he cannot ever hope to live in peace with his neighbor. Freemasonry endeavors to bring about a reformation in each individual human being. It differs from the many religions which have endeavored to reform man by seeking only to provide each of us with a set of standards which have stood the test of time from the beginning of history. The ethical philosophy of Freemasonry has been the same as the ethical teachings of small groups in every civilization but with this difference - in Freemasonry it is imparted in a matchless symbolism which is available to each and every one of us, which teaches more and more as we reflect upon it more and more.

Freemasonry is based on sound philosophical considerations and a magnificent knowledge of the fundamental characteristics of human nature. These things teach us that the only way the world will ever be better, the only way our country, our city, our neighborhood can be improved, is for each of us to strive for self-improvement. For this effort Freemasonry provides us with the finest set of moral and ethical standards which the mind of man has been able to conceive.

We have been advised by fine Masonic historians that the transition from operative to speculative Freemasonry took place for social and economic reasons. I disagree. Last summer I had the privilege of spending two months at Oxford University lecturing and doing some work in 17th century English history. With the assistance of material from the Bodleian Library, one of the finest in the world, and manuscripts from some of the College libraries and many visits to the Ashmolean museum, I became convinced that the earliest speculatives were attracted to Masonry out of curiosity. The 17th Century was a period of revival of interest in ethical philosophy and a period of great thought on the nature of man. There were the neo-Platonists at Cambridge who stated that God had left free the human will, that the soul of man can resist the bodies' impulses. There was Richard Hooker (1554-1600) who allowed due importance to the human faculties of reason and to the moral sense but never lost sight of the orientation of man towards God. There were Kepler (1571-1630), Galileo (1564-1642) and Gilbert (1544-1603). It was Kepler who was so influenced by Pythagorean mysticism that he was convinced God had created the Universe in accordance with certain simple mathematical harmonies. To the list could be added Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes and many others.

It is with the backdrop of this tremendous revival in the study of man and his ethical and moral relationships that we must view the admission of philosophers, speculatives to the operative Craft. On the 16th of October 1646 Elias Ashmole, antiquarian, was received into a Masonic Lodge at Warrington, Lancashire, together with his Roundhead friend and cousin, Henry Manwaring of Carincham, Cheshire. Ashmole's diary gives the time of the event as 4:30 p.m. notes the name of the Lodge's Warden, and the names of six other Masons 'then of the Lodge.' Ashmole's motives for joining were undoubtedly similar to those of the antiquary William Stukeley (1687-1765) who states in his autobiography that, in 1720, 'his curiosity led him to be initiated into the mysteries of Masonry, suspecting it to be the remains of the mysteries of the antients.' It is conceivable that, after acquiring by the study of astrology a taste for the exploration of ancient lore and symbolism, Ashmole not only desired to gain knowledge of such 'Pythagorean' teachings as the Lodges claimed to preserve, but that he was at this particular juncture of his life, also looking for the fellowship of brethren who, if not equally learned, would share his respect for the old and mysterious. Ashmole's note of his Masonic initiation is the earliest known record of speculative Freemasonry in an English Lodge. As has been pointed out by Josten, the note in the diary evidences an advanced stage rather than the beginning of the evolution by which the Craft Lodges were gradually transformed into esoteric societies of gentlemen and members of all professions and trades; for recent research has shown that not only Ashmole and Colonel Henry Manwaring, but all of the seven other Freemasons, whose names are given, were in no way connected with operative Freemasonry.

This brings us to the question of what has enabled Freemasonry to survive the centuries when countless other fraternal and scholarly societies have not. How has Freemasonry survived the anti-Masonry of the 18th century, the 19th century, with its Morgan incident and even the events of the 20th century?

Certainly the organization of Lodges and Grand Lodges, and the fundamental nature of the teachings have played a part. But I cannot help but believe that the most important reason is the very manner in which the great lessons are taught. What magnificent symbolism imparts the spirit of brotherhood in a certain handclasp. What better way to present the means of achieving and the importance of peace and harmony in a Lodge, than to have the candidate so prepared that these lessons are indelibly inscribed on his mind. At the same time he learns a magnificent lesson in charity. There are a great many other lessons imparted in symbolism, the duty of man to man, man to neighbor, man to God, to family and so on and on.

It is fascinating to discover that throughout all the changing periods of history for the last 2,500 years, the same basic valuations have persisted, the same conviction of the superiority of the soul over the body, of the unseen over the seen....

So it is with Freemasonry. We have a practical, realistic means of imparting the greatest of lessons but to, impress them upon the mind requires some physical application and necessitates certain physical qualifications that these lessons may be imparted in an unforgettable manner.