

What's Wrong with “Enthusiasm”?

Introduction

In learning a piece of ritual I found a line which required a little research for me to understand its meaning.

This is a simple example of what a "daily advancement in Masonic knowledge" can involve. When you find something perplexing in the ritual, take a few minutes to research and understand what the words mean.

In the second degree lecture on the Working Tools, we are taught:

“Not to be an enthusiast, a persecutor, a slanderer or a reviler of religion.”¹

Most of it made sense: it is obviously best not to be: “a reviler of religion”, “a slanderer”, “a persecutor” – but why are we taught “not to be an enthusiast”?

What’s wrong with “enthusiasm”?

To my surprise, this question led to a brief exploration of the place of religious diversity in Freemasonry.

Definition

Why *not* to be an "enthusiast"?

“Enthusiasm” was a particular form of religious expression which was socially disruptive in the 17th and 18th centuries, the 16-and 1700’s, when Masonic ritual was being developed into the forms known to us today.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that the word is derived from Latin *enthusiasmus*, originally from Greek, meaning literally “the fact of being possessed by a god”. The Greek “theos” for “God” is the root of the word “enthusiasm”.

The *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* defines “enthusiasm” as a

Term used pejoratively, especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for irrational and disturbed states of religious fervour, especially as found among Puritans, evangelicals, and low-church born-again zealots.

Samuel Johnson, who in 1755 published the first dictionary of the English language, defined “enthusiasm” as:

A vain belief of private revelation; a vain confidence of divine favour or communication. ... Enthusiasm is founded neither on reason nor divine revelation...

Historical Context

In Protestant England of the 1600’s, such “enthusiasm” prompted some believers to denounce and disrupt established religion. For example, a pamphlet of 1653 told how the writer²

... had listened to a speaker denounce all *ministerial* teaching and all knowledge gained therein, in order to “lay a new ground work... to be taught of God *within ourselves* by waiting upon an inward light”.

... After five meetings he was ... running through the streets of the town proclaiming “I am the way, the truth and the life”.

Some radical protestants used to interrupt church services when they felt inspired by God to call the Minister a liar; some were “running from Assembly to Assembly troubling the ministers”, and were described as “men whose work it is to *revile* the ministry”.³

Remember that admonition in our ritual: not be to “a reviler of religion”.

“Enthusiasts” became so troublesome that a proclamation of 1655 made it a crime to disturb “Ministers and other Christians in their Assemblies and Meetings”.⁴

The *Criminal Code of Canada* still provides (in s. 176):

Every one who wilfully disturbs or interrupts an assemblage of persons met for religious worship or for a moral, social or benevolent purpose is guilty of an offence...

So now we see, the admonition “not to be an enthusiast”, means not to be a *self-righteous extremist* and a trouble maker in matters of religion.

Religious Neutrality

With that in mind, we can reconsider the meaning of the line of ritual we began with:

“Not to be an enthusiast, a persecutor, a slanderer or a reviler of religion.”

I suggest that “religion” applies to the *whole sentence*, so we have:

not to be an enthusiast in religion,
not to be a persecutor of religion,
not to be a slanderer of religion, and
not to be a reviler of religion.

All of those vices had been recently practiced by Scots and Englishmen at the time our ritual was developed.

Depending on who was King or Queen at the time, particular believers – either Catholics or Protestants – had been persecuted, slandered, reviled, and executed.

Masonic ritual was adapted from the operative lodges of stone masons into the Lodges of speculative Freemasons in the 17th century, or 1600s, and further developed in the early 18th century.

The social context of that period was the English Civil Wars (1642 – 1651), during which the King’s forces fought the Parliamentary forces, and Anglicans, Puritans, Presbyterians, and Catholics all made war on each other.

King Charles I was executed in 1649, and eventually, his son King Charles II was invited back to the throne in 1660. In the interim, England was a republic under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell, known as the “Lord Protector”, and tension among political and religious factions remained high.

Also, the Thirty Years War in Europe (1618 – 1648) was still a recent memory. That series of wars between Catholic and Protestant states resulted in *millions* of deaths in Europe, by war, famine, and disease.⁵

The religious wars of the 17th century, and the trouble caused by religious “enthusiasts”, are the context for our Masonic prohibition of religious and political controversy in Lodge.⁶

While Catholics and Protestants were killing each other on the battlefield, British *intellectuals* were finding common ground in Philosophy, Science, and Reason.

For instance, in 1670 the “Royal Society”, a society of gentlemen devoted to the study of science, provided in their by-laws:⁷

... (to avoid diversion to other discourses, and for some other reasons), we barred all discourses of divinity, of state-affairs, and of news, other than what concerned our business of Philosophy.

The avoidance of discourse on “divinity, state-affairs, and news” was necessary if the members – former Royalists or Republicans -- were to work together in their common pursuit of Science. This policy was a forerunner of the similar rule in Masonry.

The *Constitutions of the Free-Masons* compiled by the Rev. Bro. James Anderson and published in 1723 instruct us that:⁸

... no private Piques or Quarrels must be brought within the Door of the Lodge, far less any Quarrels about Religion, or Nations, or State Policy, we being only, as Masons, of the *Universal* Religion ...

We find the same prohibition of religious controversy in the Charge to the Entered Apprentice: he is instructed that his excellence of character will be shown by, among other things, “abstaining from every topic of religious or political discussion while in the lodge”. (This is to bar religious quarrels, not discussions of the history or spiritual values underlying Masonry.)

Thus Freemasonry helped heal the wounds of civil war, and brought both Protestants and Catholics together in Lodge, acknowledging their common worship of the G.A.O.T.U.

Our *universal* fraternity took its *next* step in recognizing that the brotherhood of Man is not limited to Catholics and Protestants.

That Religion in which all Men Agree

Anderson's *Book of Constitutions* of 1723 also contained this charge:⁹

Concerning GOD and RELIGION:

A Mason is oblig'd ... to obey the moral law; and if he rightly understands the Art, he will never be a stupid Atheist nor an irreligious Libertine. But though in ancient Times Masons were charg'd in every Country to be of the Religion of that Country or Nation, whatever it was, yet 'tis now thought more expedient only to oblige them to **that Religion in which all Men agree**, leaving their particular Opinions to themselves;

that is, to be good Men and true, or Men of Honour and Honesty, by whatever Denominations or Persuasions they may be distinguish'd;

whereby Masonry becomes the Center of Union, and the Means of conciliating true Friendship...

This Charge was initially controversial. Some Masons wanted to retain the Christian traditions of the past. The Grand Lodge of the Antients criticized the Grand Lodge of England for editing Christian references out of the ritual.¹⁰

When the *Book of Constitutions* was first published in 1723, prescribing “that Religion in which all Men agree”, the only religion widespread in England other than Protestant and Catholic Christianity was Judaism. At the time our ritual was developed, the Jewish community in England was fairly young.

In the year 1290, King Edward I had ordered the expulsion of *all* Jews from England, which allowed him to confiscate their assets. Similar persecution later became widespread throughout medieval Europe.

The expulsion of Jews from Catholic kingdoms, such as Spain and France, led to the growth of a large Jewish community in Protestant Amsterdam. After the English Civil War, in 1656 Oliver Cromwell readmitted Jews into England. The commercial success of Amsterdam and increased trade between Protestant England and Holland were factors in that decision. The first synagogue in London, at least since the middle ages, operated openly only from 1656, although it had been in use secretly before that time.¹¹

The new Protestant religious movements in 17th century England brought a new emphasis on the reading of scripture, including the Hebrew Scriptures known to the Christians as the Old Testament. This sparked new interest in Judaism as a foundation of Christianity.

In addition to the Protestant interest in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Charges of the medieval stone masons, based on stories from the Old Testament, had already prepared the ground for the opening of Freemasonry to Jews. Hebrew names begin appearing in Grand Lodge records from 1725, with Israel Segalas, and many more in the 1730s.¹²

The universality of Masonry, open to men of *all religions*, Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and others, was eventually confirmed during the spread of Masonry across the globe, through the medium of the British empire.

But religious fraternalism did not always come easily. Although Masonic Lodges were first established in India from 1730, they were for a long time closed to Indians, by the use of the blackball. The first Hindu was not admitted there until 1857, and the first Sikh to be made a Mason was initiated in 1861.¹³ In the French colonies of north Africa and the middle east, on the other hand, Muslim brothers were initiated as early as the mid-1700s.¹⁴

Conclusion

In conclusion, a few final thoughts about our ritual's admonition against "enthusiasm":

There's nothing wrong with being inspired by God, but as Freemasons we temper that with Reason. We apply our God-given Reason to our contemplation of the Divine, using the seven liberal arts and sciences, which encompass all learning.

The allegories and symbolism of Masonry may make us better able to see *metaphorical* meanings common to *all* religions, or as Bro. James Anderson put it, "that Religion in which all Men agree".

I close with an appeal for religious tolerance, written by a Roman Senator to a Christian Emperor in the 4th century C.E.:¹⁵

It is reasonable that all worship be considered one. We look at the same stars, the sky belongs to all, the same universe surrounds us. What does it matter by what method each seeks the truth? One cannot arrive at so great a secret by only one road.

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Notes:

¹ Canadian Ritual, *Book of the Work*, Grand Lodge of Canada in the Province of Ontario. This lecture on the working tools is derived from the English Lectures, preserved by the Emulation Lodge in London.

² Fraser, Antonia. *Our Chief of Men*. London: Methuen, 1985, pp. 570-571

³ Fraser, pp. 570-71

⁴ Fraser, p. 573

⁵ Wedgwood, C.V. *The Thirty Years War*. London: Folio Society, 1999

⁶ Also, in the early 18th century, Hanoverian and Stuart factions were contesting for the throne of the United Kingdom of Great Britain, divided on political, religious, and nationalist grounds, leading to armed rebellions in 1715 and 1745. The new Grand Lodge of 1717 was anxious to avoid factional entanglements in that contest.

⁷ Knight, Christopher and Lomas, Robert. *The Hiram Key*. London: Arrow Books, 1997, p. 452, quoting one of the founding members of the Royal Society, 17th century mathematician John Wallis, from his *A Defence of the Royal Society and the Philosophical Transactions particularly those of July, 1670*, by John Wallis, D.D., Professor of Geometry in Oxford and Fellow of the Royal Society, London, 1678

⁸ Anderson, Rev. James. *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons, 1723*, Charge VI, Of Behaviour, item 2

⁹ Anderson, Charge I, Concerning God and Religion

¹⁰ Jones, Bernard. *Freemasons' Guide and Compendium*. Nashville, USA: Cumberland House, 2006, p. 201 (first published UK, 1950)

¹¹ Fraser, pp. 558-568

¹² Sadler, Henry. *Masonic Facts and Fictions*. LaVergne, Tennessee: Kessinger Publishing, 2010, pp. 118-119 (reprint of 1887 ed.)

¹³ Grand Lodge of A.F. & A.M. of India, website accessed March 4/11: <http://www.masonindia.org/index10.html>

¹⁴ Brice, William Charles. *An Historical Atlas of Islam*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981, p. 296; accessed March 9/11: http://books.google.ca/books?id=6DYVAAAAIAAJ&pg=PA296&lpg=PA296&dq=first+muslim+freemason&source=bl&ots=0TkZNLqf7m&sig=PXoLJgfXn1mN_OPMI4HT6BIYO80&hl=en#v=twopage&q=first%20muslim%20freemason&f=false

¹⁵ Freke, Timothy and Gandy, Peter. *The Jesus Mysteries*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001, p. 297; quoting Senator Symmachus to Emperor Valentinian II, 383 C.E.