Ethics of Freemasonry

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Ethics can be defined as a set of rules, principles or ways of thinking that guide a group. Since early times, society has been guided by such sets of rules or laws. We think that the Egyptian civilization was the first to be recognized as such on Earth but little of the organized thinking on the role of man as an ideal has come down to us from it. It is generally accepted that it was in the era of the Greek civilization that men in the West tried to think about what should be an ideal set of rules. They realized then that Law was one thing and Morality another. The early Greek thinkers discountenanced the role of God or the gods in their systems and concentrated on Man, his thoughts, and his place in the world as they saw it. Men such as Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle debated at length. Their thoughts are still extant today and still part of the curriculum of any modern teaching on Philosophy.

Five hundred years later Christian ethics began to be laid down. These were based on their own Christian beliefs and those of their Greek and Hebrew forebears. This system was to last in the Western World for about 1500 years until the Renaissance started off what came to be known as "The Age of Reason" and "The Age of Enlightenment" in the 17th and early 18th centuries. Here, the then unquestioned power of the Christian Church came into conflict with the new thinking that again placed Man at the center of the quest for true knowledge, instead of relying on the dogmatic statements of the Church, which had God at their heart. This led to new sets of ethics being formulated based on Man and his place in the Universe. Humanism and its followers were to vie with religion for the next three centuries even until today. Utilitarianism, Marxism, Communism and the ethics of Kant, Nietzsche and Freud, to name a few, all followed on. Indeed, in the last few years, we have all witnessed the dramatic collapse of one of the world's largest ethical systems, namely Marxism, Leninism or what is normally known as Communism. A new way of thinking is required of all those who were reared under its influence.

Let us now turn to our own interest. Freemasonry, the modern version of which arose in the 18th century. One should recall to mind here that prior to 1717 only one evening was necessary to make a Mason. He was initiated, then immediately passed, and made a Fellow of the Craft. Indeed, for a time the new Grand Lodge wanted all Fellow Crafts made only in Grand Lodge. They also resolutely, for several decades, set their faces against the third degree, and the Royal Arch was banned for most of the century. From this we learn that those early Masons were only concerned with the first degree and the lessons it contained. Let?s face it, the real morality or ethics of our Craft are all spelled out there, the third degree being on a totally different plane. It is in that degree only that the allegory that Freemasonry speaks of takes place. There is no allegory in the first degree. All is absolutely plain. That is what the Premier Grand Lodge wanted and tried to adhere to for close on a century.

Freemasonry should have, and does have, an ethical system for those who join its ranks. This system is often written about in its particular elements but is not often shown as a general ethical system. As a group, we tell the world that we are a system of morality. What is that system and where did it come from? Given that we have a set of ethics, it should be possible to look at them, trace them back, and so identify the origins from which they sprang.

Did it come from Egypt? No. The average man in that country had his way of life influenced by a multitude of gods, mostly with an animal connotation. Some of the population belonged to the priesthood and their lives were spent attending to the god of the moment. Nothing has come from them to influence us. There was a further group that through nearly two thousand years experienced the ancient mysteries. It says a great deal about them that in all that time and with all those people, no one can tell us today exactly what they went through. However, we do have a connection of a sort in that we pattern our degrees on the same manner in which they are reputed to have done. So far as our third degree is concerned, from what we do know of their ceremonies, there could be certain similarities. There could be a further connection with Egypt in that Abraham and Moses would have been influenced by the thought they encountered while there, which in turn would have influenced Christianity.

Did it come from the Knights Templar? No. Masons certainly built their castles and churches. Also the Knights had certain ceremonies of admission and were excessively secretive. However, their ethos was strict; Poverty, Chastity and Obedience. Let us say straight away these three are singularly missing in today?s Masonic world and so they, as a source, must be discounted!

What of the Kabbalists, Rosicrucians, Alchemists and Brethren of the Rosy Cross? While some of their thinking or their methods may have come down to us, as a way of life, or a set of ethics, they have nothing to contribute.

What of the operative stonemasons of the medieval period onwards? Well, we do have abundant evidence that they did have an ethos, they did practice it, and most of it has passed into our present system. The Geneva Bible of the 16th century has as its dedication a lengthy discourse exhorting Queen Elizabeth I to build up and maintain a spiritual building, even the Church. In the 17th century, John Bunyan wrote a book King Solomon's Temple Spiritualised and Sir Isaac Newton devoted much of his time to a study of the dimensions of King Solomon's Temple, believing it had a message for all mankind. A large model of the Temple was also displayed in London for several years and raised great interest. One of the early Masonic documents of 1710 called The Dumphries Manuscript No. 4 has a section devoted to the Temple (meaning King Solomon's Temple), which is there transformed into a spiritual church. There are numerous questions and answers concerning the Temple which show it in a Christian and spiritual light. So society in general and Freemasons in particular were, prior to 1717, well aware of King Solomon's Temple and Freemasons of the pre Grand Lodge era also were familiar with the Old Charges (c. 1400-1700) and in Scotland at least were used to a catechism which explained our way of life. All in all, looking at it from the point of view of an ethos, one can accept the standard view that we are the direct descendants of operative or working stonemasons who flourished throughout Europe in the mediaeval period or earlier.

The earliest recorded writings of these people are the so-called Ancient Charges of a Freemason or Gothic Constitutions. These were written in a book or on a scroll, and were read out to a candidate when he was apprenticed to, joined, became a Fellow, or was made a Master of their trade of stone masonry. It consisted of a prayer, a history of the craft of Masonry, general charges to all Masons, Fellows, Apprentices and Masters and finally the taking of a binding oath to abide by those charges.

These charges related to his conduct as a worker, (the employer and employee), and as a private person, both in his working life and his private life. These were in fact, what could be called a set of ethics, or a way of life to follow at all times while he was associated with the craft of stone masonry. They bound him to ethical and legal obligations. We are concerned here with the ethical side of his daily life as a mason. For a manual trade, they are quite unusual in expecting a high standard of personal and working conduct. It should here be mentioned the talk will center around the practices of English Freemasonry though there were very close associations with those followed by Scottish, Irish, German and French masons. Some excerpts will now be given. They (the Charges) varied in number according to the manuscript used, but were somewhere around twenty to thirty. The first manuscript we know was the Regius Poem, (c. 1390) which had two sections; first fifteen articles for masters and the second fifteen points for craftsmen. Condensed and paraphrased they were that brethren had to promise to:

Coat of Arms1) Be true to King and Country;

Coat of Arms2) Believe in God and practise the ten commandments;

Coat of Arms3) Love one another and be true to one another;

Coat of Arms4) Work honestly for their Master to the credit and honesty of themselves;

Coat of Arms5) Reverence their elders;

Coat of Arms6) Not slander a brother behind his back;

Coat of Arms7) Help other masons in trouble;

Coat of Arms8) Not be a thief, frequent low places or do anything to bring discredit on the lodge;

Coat of Arms9) Call each other Brother or Fellow;

Coat of Arms10) Not take on any work unless they could honestly complete it.

There were many more relating to work practices and private conduct but the above are some of the important ones. They all had the same idea, that of working and living in harmony together to produce a worthwhile result for the person, people or group employing them. A feature of the charges was that they applied to everyone, from the newest Entered Apprentice to the oldest Master in charge of the work. All could be, and were, held accountable to the rest of the brethren of the lodge. All were moreover sworn to secrecy. No doubt this was done to retain trade secrets relating to stone masonry work and to the laying out of the drafting plans for buildings. One of the results of this was to relatively isolate them as a group. This helped to preserve their traditions in the changing ages.

In the early 17th century we are aware that Freemasonry came to accept non-working masons among their ranks, and in the 18th century, what we now call Speculative Masonry came into being. They produced their own new Order which was, initially reshaped in the first three or four decades of that century and have remained with us virtually unchanged down to today. How then do we see Freemasonry in the present time? How do we distinguish our ethical system? What is considered unmasonic and outside our belief system? In short what makes a man a Mason?

The following is what I believe is a list of what modern Freemasons accept as basic beliefs of Masonic thought. This can be described as a system of belief and therefore an ethical system. One will see in them a positive link to the past. Indeed, I have set them out as fifteen points, copying that of the Regius Manuscript. A speculative Freemason believes:

Coat of Arms1) In a God as a Supreme Being;

Coat of Arms2) That that God is a creative God who makes the Universe and everything in it, including ourselves;

Coat of Arms3) That the Volume of the sacred Law of an individual brother is a spiritual guide for him;

Coat of Arms4) That the Craft, (i.e. the speculative system), is formed to promote in the mind of a brother that he is an individual capable of Coat of Armsrefining his mind, and through that, his conduct;

Coat of Arms5) That the way to alter a brother?s thinking is not by compulsion or force, but by demonstration and example;

Coat of Arms6) That the way this is done is based on the practices of the ancient operative stonemason, but which today are moralistic in theirCoat of Armsview on the various subjects concerned, and illustrated by symbols;

Coat of Arms7) That a Masonic life can be made by being moral and following the theological and moral virtues and the Masonic principles;

Coat of Arms8) That the theological virtues are Faith, Hope and Charity in its widest sense;

Coat of Arms9) That the moral virtues are Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence and Justice;

Coat of Arms10) That the Masonic principles are Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth;

Coat of Arms11) That the characteristics of a Freemason are Virtue, Honour and Mercy;

Coat of Arms12) That he has a duty to God, his neighbour and to himself;

Coat of Arms13) That a Freemason is a worker, and through his work he gives service to others, by doing which, he fulfils his own innateCoat of Armscapabilities;

Coat of Arms14) That his physical body is likened to a Temple which houses within it a portion of the Holy Spirit given by God;

Coat of Arms15) That his mind, animated by the Spirit of God is, if he follows our teachings, brought to the fullest perfection it is capable of hereCoat of Armson Earth, and that at his death it will be built into the Supreme Being?s Universal Spiritual Temple of Mankind.

No doubt others could add many more items, but these items, numbered one to fifteen, can be described as an invisible boundary within which a man who describes himself as a Freemason could comfortably live.

What then is considered unmasonic? He would be one who stepped outside that invisible boundary. He would be one whose general conduct, wherever he is, within a lodge or out in the world itself, would fall short of the high ideals Freemasons set for themselves. He would do this by dishonest conduct, dissembling, talking behind peoples' backs, carrying tales, toadying to a superior for personal gain, taking work from someone else who is capable of doing it, being an enthusiast or fanatical about something, acting against his employers, the civil authorities or the laws of the country, and by denying a personal belief in a God. In our Craft we have brethren who are masons and yet who are not Masons in the truest sense of the word. As Bro. Dudley Wright puts it: "They are the ones who think brotherhood means a small group or clique of their friends, to whom relief means grudgingly handing over a few coins after they have satisfied their own pleasures, and to whom truth means that which does not clash with their own preconceived opinions and prejudices."

In short we see a Masonic person as a man consciously trying to live by the principles of the Order in such a way that his general demeanour, conduct and actions cause everyone associated with him to see him as a just and upright person of total integrity, who treats everyone he has dealings with according to their station in life, and who practices clarity in the widest sense of love in the community.

As Freemasons we know that life entails constant work and that some of that work should be allotted to the service of others. We know that each of us is an individual with a portion of the Spirit of God within us. That all our words and actions affect that spirit, so that as the close of our days, when we pass on and it returns to God, it is the certainty that the spirit has been fashioned or moulded in such a manner that we hope it reflects honour on its owner. To use a symbol based on our operative forebears, our rough ashlar with which we commenced our association with Freemasonry is now transformed into our perfect ashlar and, we hope, is fit to be place in God's Universal Spiritual Temple of Mankind.

While our ethics remain so based, as they have been since 1717 and earlier, so long will the Society of Freemasons continue to have a unique place in the value systems of mankind. It will continue to aid the individual mason in particular and mankind in general.

Appendix A

Definitions from Oxford Dictionary

Allegory:Coat of ArmsA story, poem or picture which can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning.

Ethic:Coat of ArmsA set of moral principles. The science of moral principles.

Ethics:Coat of ArmsThe moral principles governing or influencing conduct. The branch of knowledge concerned with moral principlesCoat of Armsbased on ethos.

Ethos:Coat of Arms The characteristic spirit of a culture, era or community as manifested in its attitudes and aspirations.

Moral:Coat of ArmsAdhering to the code of behaviour that is considered right or acceptable.

Morality:Coat of ArmsA system of values and moral principles.

Moral Philosophy:Coat of ArmsThe brand of philosophy concerned with ethics.

Philosophy:Coat of ArmsA theory or attitude that guides one?s behaviour.

Symbol:Coat of ArmsA thing that represents or stands for something else, especially a material object representing something abstract.

System:Coat of ArmsAn organized scheme or method. A set of things working together as a mechanism or interconnecting network.

Veiled:Coat of ArmsPartially concealed, disguised or obscure.

Putting one's tongue in one's cheek one can say from the above that Freemasonry is an ethos partially concealed in a story which can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning and illustrated by material objects that represent abstract qualities:

or:

Freemasonry is a system of morality veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols.

I know which one I'd rather have!

Appendix B

Introduction to the Geneva Bible-1577

TO THE MOST VERTUOUS

and noble Queene Elizabeth, Queen of England,

France, and Ireland, etc., Grace and peace from God the

Father through Christ Jesus our Lord.

Howe hard a thing is, and what great implements led, to enterprise any

worthie act, not only daily experience sufficiently sheweth (most noble and

virtuous Queen) but also that notable proverbe doeth confirme the same, which

admonisheth us, that All things are hard which are faire and excellent. And what

enterprise can there be of greater importance, and more acceptable unto God, or

more worthie of singular commendation, then the building of the Lords Temple, the house of God,

the Church of Christ, where the Sonne of God is the head and perfection?

When Zerubbabel went about to build the material Temple, according to the commandments of the Lord, what difficulties and stayes daily arose to hinder his worthie indevours, the bookes of Ezra and Esdras plainly witnesse: ho that not onely he and the people of God were sore molested with foreine adversaries (whereof some maliciously warred against them, and corrupted the Kings officers: and others craftily pracised under pretence of religion) but also at home with domesticall enemies, as false Prophets, craftie worldlings, faint hearted soldiers, and oppressors of their brethren, who as well as by false doctrine and lyes, as by subtl counsel, cowardies, and extortion, discouraged the heartes almost of all: so that the Lords worke was not only interrupted and left off for a long time, but scarecely at the length with great labour and danger after a sort brought to passé.

Which thing when we weigh aright, and consider earnestly howe much greater charge God hath layd upon you in making you a builder of his spiritual Temple, we cannot but partly feare, knowing the craft and force of Satan our siritual enemie, and the weakness and inabilitie of this our nature: partly be fervent in our prayers toward God that he would bring to perfection this noble worke whichhe had begun by you: and therefore we endevour our selves by all means to ayde, and to bestowe our whole force under your graces standard, whom God hath made as our Zerubbable for the erecting of this most excellent Temple, and to plante and mainteine his holy word to the advancement of his glorie, for your owne honour and salvation of your soule, and for the singular comfort of that great flocke which Christ Jesus the great shepheard hath bought with his precious blood, and committed unto your charge to be fed both in bodei and soule.

Considering therefore how manie enemies there are, which by one meanes or other, as the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin went about to stay the buylding of that Temple, so labour to hinder the course of this building (whereof some are Papists, who under pretence of favouring Gods worde, traitorously seeke to erect idolatrie and to destroye your Majestie: some are workings, who as Demas have forsaken Christ for the love of this world; others are ambitious Prelates, who as Amasiah and Diotrephes can abide none but themselves; and as Demtrius many practice sedition to mainteine their errours) we persuaded ourselves that there was no way to expedient and necessarie for the preservation of the one, destruction of the other, as to present unto your Majestie he Holy Scriptures faithfully and plainely translated according to the languages wherein they were first written by the Holie Ghost. For the word of God is an evident token of Gods love and our assurance of his defence, wheresoever it is obediently received: it is the trial of the spirits: and as the Prophet saith, it is a fyre and hammer to breake the stonie hearts of them that resist Gods mercies offred by the preaching of the same. Yea it is sharper than anie two edged sworde to examine the verie thoughtes and sciudge the affections of the heart, and to discover whatsoever lyeth under hypocrasie and would be secret from the face of God and his Church. So that this must be the first foundation and groundworke, according whereunto the god stones of this building framed, and tied out and rejected.

Now as he that goeth about to laye a foundation surely, first taketh away such impediments as might surely either hurte, let, or deforme the worke: so it is necessarie that your Graces zeal appeare herein, that neither the craftie persuasion of man, neither worldly policie, or naturaliate dissuade you to roote out, cut downed and destoye these weedes and implediments which do not only deface your building but utterly indevour, yea and threaten the ruine thereof. For when the noble Josias enterprised the like kind of worke, among other notable and manie things he destroyed, not onely with utter confusion the idoles with their appertinances, but also burnt (in signe of detestation) the idolatrous Priests bones upon their altars, and put to death the false prophets and sorcerers, to performe the wordes of the Lawe of God: and therefore the Lord gave him good successe and blessed him wonderfully, so long as he made Gods worde his line and rule to followe, and enterprised nothing before he had inquired at the mouth of the Lord.

And if these zealous beginnings seeme dangerous and to breed disquietnes in your dominions, yet by the storie of King Asa it is manifest, that the quietnes and peace of Kingdomes standeth in the utter abolishing of idolatrie, and in advancing of true Religion: for in his daies Judah lived in rest and quietness for the space of five and thirtie yeere, till at length hee began to be colde in the zeale of the Lord, feared the power of man, imprisoned the Prophet of God, and oppressed the people: then the Lord sent him warres, and at length took him away by death.

Wherefore great wisdome, not worldly, but heavenly is here required, which your Grace must earnestly crave of the Lord, as did Salomon, to whom God gave an understanding heart to judge his people aright, and to discerne betweene good and bad. For if God for the furnishing of the old temple gave the spirit of winsome and understanding to them that should be the workmen thereof, as to Bezaleel, Aholiab, and Hiram: how much more will he indewe your Grace and other Godly Princes and chiefe Governours with a principall spirit, that you may procure and commande things necessarie for this most holie Temple, foresee and take heede of things that might hidner it, and abolish and destroy whatsoever might impayre and overthrowe the same?

Moreover the marveilous diligence and zeale of Jehosaphat, Josiah, and Hezekiah are by the singular providence of God left as an example to all godly ruler to reforme their countreys and to establish the worde of God with all speede, lest the wrath of the Lord fall upon them for the neglecting thereof. For these excellent Kings did not only imbrace the worde promptly and joyfully, but also procured earnestly and commanded the same to be taught, preached and maintained through all their countreys and dominions binding them and all their subjectes both great and small with solemne protestations and covenants before God, to obey the word, and to walk after the wayes of the Lord. Yes and in the days of King Asa it was enacted that whosoever would not seeke the Lord God of Israel, should be slaine, whether he were small or great, man or woman. And for the establishing hereof and performance of this solemne othe, aswel Priests as Judges were appointed and placed through all the cities of Judah to instruct the people in the true knowledge & feare of God, and to minister justice according to the word, knowing that, except God by his word did reigne in the hearts and soules, all mans diligence and indevours were of none effect: for without this worde we can not discerne between justice, and injurie, protection and oppression, wisdome and foolishness, knowledge and ignorance, good and evil. Therefore the Lord, who is the chiefe governour of his Church, willeth that nothing be attempted before we have inquired thereof at his mouth. For seeing he is our God, of duetie we must give him his preeminence, that of ourselves we enterprise nothing, but that which he hath appointed, who onely knoweth all things, and governeth them as may best serve to his glorie and our salvation. We ought not therefore to prevent him, or do anie thing without his word, but as soone as he hath reveiled his will, immediately put it into execution.

Now as concerning the maner of this building, it is not according to man, nor after the wisdome of the flesh, but of the Spirit, and according to the word of God, whose wayes are divers from mans wayes. For if it was not lawfull for Moses to builde the materiall Tabernacle after anie other sort then God had shewed him by a paterne, neither to prescribe any other ceremonies and lawes then such as the Lord had expressly commanded: how can it be lawful to proceede in this spiritual building any othe waies, then Jesus Christ the Sonne of God, who is both the foundation, head, and chief corner stone thereof, hath commanded by his word? And forasmuch as he hath established and left and order in his Church for the buylding up of his bodie, appointing some to be Apostles, some Prophets, other evangelists, Pastors & teachers, he signifieth that everie one according as he is placed in this bodie which is the Church, ought to inquire of his ministers concerning the will of the Lord, which is reveiled in his worde. or they are, saith Jeremiah, as the mouth of the Lord: yea he promiseth to be with their mouth, and that their lippes shall keepe knowledge, and that the trueth and the lawe shall be in their mouth. For it is their office chiefely to understand the Scriptures, and teache them. For this rule the people of Israel in matters of difficultie used to aske the Lorde eyther by the Prophets, or by the meanes of the Hie Priest, who bare Vrim and Thummim, which wre tokns of light and knowledge, of holiness and perfection which should be the hie Priest. Therefore when Jehosephat tooke this order in the Church of Israel, he appointed Amariah to be the cheife concerning the word of God, because he was most expert in the law of the Lord and could give counsel and governe according to the same. Els there is no degree or office which may have that authoritie and priviledge to decide concerning Gods word, except with hee useth the Spirit of God, and sufficient knowledge and judgement to define according thereunto. And as every one is indued of God with greater giftes, so ought he to be herein chiefly heard, or at least that without the express worde none be heard: for he that hath not the word speaketh not by the mouth of the Lord. Againe, what danger it is to do anything, seeme it never so godly or necessarie, without consulting Gods mouth, the example of the Israelites, deceived hereby through the Gibeonites: and of Saul, whose intention seemed good and necessarie: and of Josiah also, who for greater considerations was moved for the defence of true religion and his people, to fight against Pharaoh Necho King of Egypt, may sufficiently admonish us.

Last of all (most gracious Queen) for the advancement of this building and rearing up the worked, two things are necessarie, First, that we have a lively and seadfast faith in Christ Jesus, who must dwell in our heartes, as the only meanes and assurance of our salvation: for he is the ladder that reacheth from the earth to the ehaven: he lifteth up his Church and setteth it in the heavenly places: he maketh us lively stones and buyldeth us upon himself: he joyneth us to him selfe as the members and bodie to the head: yea he maketh him selfe and his Church one Christ. The next is, That our fayth bring forth good frutes so that our Godly cnnection may serve as a witness to confirme our election, and be an example to all others to walke as appertaineth to the vocation whereunto they are called: least the worde of God bee evil spoken of, and this building be stayed to growe up to a just height, which can not be without the great pronuncviation of Gods just vengeance and discouraging of manie thousands throughe all the worlde, if they should see that our life were not holie and agreeable to our profession. For the eyes of all that feare God in all places beholde your countreyes as an example to all that believe, and the prayers of all the godlie at all times are directed to God for the preservation of your Majestie. For considering Gods wonderful mercies towards you at all seasons who hath pulled you out of the mouth of the lyons, and how that from your youth you have been brought up in the holy Scriptures, the hope of all men is so increased, that he cannot but looke that God should bring to passé some wonderful worke by your Grace to the universall comfort of his Church. Therefore even above strength you must shew, yourself strong and holde in Gods matters: and though Satan lay all his power and craft together to hurth and hinder the Lords building: yet you be assured that God will fight from heaven against this great dragon, the ancient serpent, which is called the devil and Satan, til he have accomplished the whole worke and made his Church glorious to himselfe, without spot or wrinkle. For albeit all other Kingdomes and Monarchies, as the Babylonians, Pesians, Grecians, and Romanes have fallen and taken end: yet the Church of Christ even under the Crosse hath from the beginning of the world bene victorious, and shallbe everlasting. Trueth it is, that some time it seemeth to be shadowed wit a cloude, or driven with a stormie persecution, yet sodenly the beames of Christ the sunne of Justice shine and bring it to light and libertie. If for a time it lye covered with ashes, yet it is quickly kindled againe by the winde of Gods Spirit: though it seemd drowned in the Sea, or parched and pyned in the wilderness, yet God giveth ever good successe. For he punisheth the enemies, and delivereth his, nourisheth them, and still preserveth them under his wings. The Lorde of lords and King of kings who hath ever defended his, strengthen, comfort, and preserve your Majestie, that you may be able to buylde up the ruines of Gods house to his glorie, and discharge of your conscience, and to the comfort of them that love this coming of Christ Jesus our Lord.

Divider

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