

## **Freemasonry and Religion**

**Bro. Associate Professor Pete Lentini,  
Victorian Lodge of Research, No. 218 and Comacine-Acanthus Lodge, No. 400**

### **Introduction**

Although Freemasonry does not advocate that its members profess a particular faith or that they practice or adhere to their sacred paths with specific degrees of intensity or commitment, the Craft does require that Brethren believe that there is some superior being, or some force that is greater themselves—which many scholars might consider to be a bare minimum for constituting a religion. Indeed, the topic of the continuities, contradictions and departures between the Craft and religious beliefs occupies an important place within the daily lives and interests of many Freemasons. The relationship between religion and Freemasonry has also been a focus of debate and research within previous numbers of these *Transactions*. Indeed, our Lodge of Research Brethren have written no fewer than 11 major articles about religion (or secularism) within the context of Freemasonry or that have addressed religious themes relating to or affecting the Craft and its members (Duke 1992; Hitchen 1993; Love 1993; Hollingsworth 1996; McKenzie 1997; Beresiner 2000; McKenna 2003; Gale 2006; David 2009; Shade 2010; Richmond 2013). This paper's aim is to develop a more enhanced understanding of the relationship between Freemasonry and some broad theological trends, and to maintain, extend and increase the body of Masonic research into these topics produced by this Lodge's membership. Additionally, this paper attempts to take further and to contemplate quite seriously some of the very important propositions that WBro Alan Richmond raised in the previous volume of *Transactions* about ways that Freemasons might consider rethinking and contemporizing some elements of the Craft's ritual and practices (Richmond 2013). WBro Richmond discusses several important matters such as our relationships with the Prince Hall Lodges, how the ritual addresses the issue of slavery and free-born status, and membership for women within his paper. However, these themes are beyond the scope of the present contribution, which confines itself to the relationships between Freemasonry and religion. The paper addresses several questions. These include: What is the difference between Freemasonry and Religion? What are the reasons for religious objections to Freemasonry? What are the similarities and differences between Theism, Monotheism, Deism, Atheism and Agnosticism?

### **The Similarities and Differences Between Freemasonry and Religion**

Religions possess general characteristics and perform various functions. Huston Smith suggests that religion, 'in its widest sense' constitutes 'a way of life woven around people's ultimate concerns' and 'in a narrower sense it is 'a concern to align humanity with the transcendental ground of its existence...'' (Smith 1991: 183). R. Scott Appleby (2000: 10-11) argues that 'religion embraces a creed, a cult [object of worship-PL], a code of conduct and a confessional community.'

However, in considering Smith's definition, then Freemasonry has most, if not all of the qualities that a religion possesses. Indeed, through charitable acts, contemplations on proper moral development, the requirement that a Freemason believe in a deity, and especially the third degree ceremony, the contemplation of death and how an individual's earthly behaviour will influence the prospects of an afterlife, the Craft could constitute a religion.

Similarly, Freemasonry shares much of what Appleby lists as present in religions. Freemasons clearly are a community. They have a distinct code of conduct. However, they

come from various confessional communities, and do not constitute a single one. They therefore do not espouse the same creed, nor do they share the same notion of cult, or object of worship.

Numerous Masonic organisations and individual Masons, stress that Freemasonry is not a formal religion. According to Freemasons Victoria,

Freemasonry does not have any theological doctrines, offers no sacraments and does not claim to lead to salvation. It is not a substitute for religion, nor is it a forum for a religious discussion. To be a Freemason, you must, however, have a belief in a "Supreme Being".

...

Freemasonry promotes unity and tolerance amongst all men and does not discriminate against any religion. The principles and practices of Freemasonry are compatible with all compassionate religions that teach respect for the deity and tolerance towards one's fellow man. If anything, Freemasonry complements the philosophies of these faiths (Freemasons Victoria, n.d.).

Scottish Freemason and author Robert L D Cooper argues that, 'Freemasonry is not a religion as it is missing some of the essential elements that define the very nature of a religion, in particular a dogma' (Cooper 2011: 122-23). Hence, he too notices that the absence of a uniform creed amongst Brethren would preclude Freemasonry from being constituted as a religion.

Non-Masonic scholars have made similar observations. According to Robert O. Gilbert, 'Although members must believe in God, Freemasonry is not a religion, nor a substitute for religion. The masonic precepts are simply those of public and private morality, based on the principles of brotherly love, religion (in the sense of charity) and truth' (Gilbert 2004: 315).

Nonetheless, espousing such principles and arguing that they are located within each Brother's Volume of Sacred Law, and that individuals are accountable to God, and consider their actions are divinely oriented and that they are articulating them in a way that reflects religious beliefs, Freemasonry corresponds somewhat to what William Sims Bainbridge has identified as religious movements. He argues (1997: 3):

A religious movement is a relatively organized attempt by a number of people to cause or prevent change in a religious organization or in religious aspects of life. Religious movements have some similarities with political, cultural and social movements, in that they are collective human attempts to create or block change. But their religious character is a decisive part of their definition, and we cannot understand them unless we recognize their connection to human feelings about the divine. Such movements are special expressions that motivate religion of all kinds.

Indeed, it is therefore not surprising that Gilbert's contribution on Freemasonry appears in a volume on religious movements edited by Christopher Partridge, one of the world's leading scholars on both religious movements and the esoteric.

Freemasonry clearly espouses *some* religious principles and seeks to exhibit moral behaviour. However, it is not entirely a religious movement either. It is based on religious values, its members must adhere to religious beliefs, and it encourages its members to behave in manners that would correspond to the best qualities of all religions. However, it *does not* coincide completely with Bainbridge's definition of a religious movement because the religious themes and practices to which it adheres pertain solely to its members. *Freemasonry and Freemasons do not seek to impose their values on others*. Its members assist the broader community. They are concerned for their welfare and they seek to be role models to others by their behaviour and morals. However, that is the extent of their outward religious activity. It permits all individuals freedom of conscience. Freemasons and the Craft view religious

proselytising as divisive, and that it is counterproductive to attempt to interfere with others' religious matters. In this respect, Freemasonry is radically different from other religiously oriented fraternities such as the Knights of Columbus. Although their charitable efforts are extremely praiseworthy, The Knights are a Catholic-only order, and they have crossed the line from a purely benevolent organisation to include elements of a religious and political movement, having agitated against women's reproductive choice and gay marriage in the United States (Gibson 2012; Catholics For Choice 2013).

Freemasonry is a fraternal, charitable and voluntary organisation of religiously oriented individuals of many faiths who come together for common purposes of advancing the welfare of all within society who require their assistance. It is not a religion that distinguishes only its members as the select who are destined for salvation, and considers all others as profane and damned. Indeed, as Mackey and McClenachan have eloquently stated (1912a: 439), Freemasonry's 'universality is its boast; In its language, citizens of every nation may converse; at its altar men of all religions may kneel in its creed, disciples of every faith may subscribe'.

### **Religious Antagonisms towards Freemasonry**

Although Freemasonry does not restrict itself to members of any particular faith, and indeed welcomes them from many belief systems, there have been some faiths—or more appropriately members of some faiths—that have harboured antagonisms towards the Craft. Nonetheless, even within particular faiths that have been hostile to Freemasonry this antipathy occurred at different times. For example, in Freemasonry's early days some high ranking Catholic clerics numbered among the Brethren. However, after the 1738 Papal Bull against Freemasonry, Catholic membership declined for over two centuries. The Catholic Church was afraid that its members would adopt heretical and seditious ideas in associating with Freemasons. They also strenuously opposed that as members in Freemasonry, Catholics would be taking oaths to any entity other than the Church or God, and that Freemasons conducted their operations in secret (Clement XII 1738).

Various Protestant denominations propagandized that Freemasonry constituted some form of Satanic cult. Indeed, there was a strong belief that during Masonic rituals Brethren would regularly raise Satan. Over the centuries many artists have depicted Satan as a horned being or demon. Hence, because some Protestants believed that Masons worshiped and invoked Satan, Freemasons became associated with goats (Mackey and McClenachan 1912a: 301). Regrettably, this misconception about Freemasonry and Satanism is long-standing, and still remains in some evangelical denominations and sects, or individual Evangelical Christians. (Gale 2006; Stewart, n.d.; Dominick, n.d.).

Despite the fact that Islam constitutes one of Freemasonry's major accepted faiths, the Qur'an is one of the recognized Volumes of Sacred Law and there are many Muslims participating in the fraternity globally, there are some points of concern about Islam and Muslims' place in Freemasonry that need to be addressed. Nonetheless, first it is important to acknowledge those parts of the Qur'an (al-Quran 1994) which correspond with Masonic ideals. Indeed, the reliance that Freemasonry places on celestial bodies as proof of divine existence and the Great Architect of the Universe's benevolence is similar to that found in 'The Romans' (30:21-23) 'Verily there are signs of His creation in the heavens and in the earth...Another of his signs is the night, a time for you to sleep, and the day to seek his bounty.' This latter point is consistent with the Junior Warden's references to separating the day in terms into periods of labour and refreshment, during the opening of the lodge in the First Degree.

Additionally, in terms of Islam's acceptance of other faiths The Qur'an states in 'The Cow' (2:62) 'Surely the believers and the Jews, Nazarenes and the Sabians (followers of John the Baptist—PL), whoever believes in God and the Last Day, and whosoever does right, shall have his reward with his Lord and will neither have fear nor regret.' Diversity, knowledge and mutual cooperation are included in 49:13 'O men, We created you from a male and female, and found you into nations and tribes that you may recognize each other.' These sentiments are reflected the global existence of Freemasonry, and the diversity amongst Brethren. Importantly, both Islam and Freemasonry esteem charity, and in the former, especially in the form of *zakat*, it is one of the faith's five pillars.

However, Freemasonry may pose some challenges to Muslims, and in particular, some Muslims may find some aspects of ceremonies and ritual offensive. In the first degree ceremony there is a requirement that Freemasons are free men. In general, this should not be problematic. However, the Masonic interpretation of Ishmael is potentially controversial. Ishmael is the father of Arabs and a Prophet in Islam. Mackey and McClenachan write (1912a: 358),

Isaac and Ishmael, [are] the sons of Abraham by Sarah and Hagar. They are recognized, from the conditions of their mothers, as the free born and the bond man....[T]he fact that the inheritance which was bestowed upon Isaac, the son of his freeborn wife, was refused to Ishmael, the son of a slave woman, gave rise to the Masonic theory which constitutes a landmark that none but the free are entitled to initiation.

They also place the Qur'an in a dubious position within the fraternity by stating, '...unlike the Old and New Testaments, the Koran [sic] has no connection with, and gives no support to, any of the Masonic legends or symbols, except in those parts which were plagiarized by the Prophet from the Jewish and Christian Scriptures' (Mackey and McClenachan 1912a: 417). Such arguments may be very old. However, these publications are still mainstays of Masonic knowledge and the statements on Ishmael remain in Masonic ceremonies.

Freemasonry is attempting to make overtures to current and prospective Muslim Brethren. That the most recent edition of *Information on Lodge Workings* (2010) notes in Chapter 21 (degree works for non-Christian Candidates, p. 337) that 'The Ritual and Ceremonial Committee are awaiting the outcome of the investigation being undertaken by the Grand Chaplains before completing this section' indicates that Grand Lodge is certainly concerned with these matters. Nonetheless, perhaps some of the aforementioned points I raised need to be brought to their attention in order for them to engage more thoroughly with candidates from the Islamic faith.

There are however, some things that no amount of good will on the part of Freemasons will be able to reconcile, such as the fact that some Muslims have very negative and conspiratorial views of Freemasonry. Indeed, Hamas, now the governing faction in Gaza includes in its Charter's Article 22 the claim that Freemasonry is under the control of the Zionists (Hamas 2004: 437), and is hence hostile towards Palestine and other Muslims. Moreover, the notorious forgery the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, which claims that Jews are seeking to take over the world in league with Freemasons, is very popular throughout the Middle East, and circulates widely as literature. Several states' official media have serialized it in television programs. Protocols 4 and 15 state that Freemasons' lodges are the recruiting grounds from which the Zionist conspiracy coopts its gentile agents, and places where it can gradually transmit its propaganda amongst the Brethren so that they may distribute it more broadly throughout society (Gray 2010: 23, 39, 147, 151; Protocols 1990: 20-21; 43).

We are taught that Freemasonry is a peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols. I would argue that the notion of the construction of King Solomon's Temple, can be considered an allegory for personal development. However, some Muslims take this literally and believe that Freemasonry is committed to helping Israel destroy the Al-Aqsa mosque to rebuild the Temple on the site in Jerusalem, the third holiest place in Islam. This is misconception is reinforced by beliefs that the Knights Templar brought the Secrets of Freemasonry with them from the Holy Land after the Crusades, and that survivors from the 14<sup>th</sup> Century persecution of the Knights Templar and their descendants stayed dormant for a while, only to resurrect the order as Freemasons. Moreover, that Anders Behring Breivik claimed that he was part of a paramilitary-oriented revived Knights Templar that would lead an anti-Islamic crusade throughout Europe, that he boasted that his 2011 terrorist attacks in Norway in response to Islamic migration to the continent constituted the first act in this military campaign, and that at the time of the attack he was a member of the Norwegian Order of Freemasons (he was excluded immediately after this was brought to light), and even posed in Masonic regalia in the photos that were contained within his Compendium outlining his objectives and philosophy, reinforced this conspiracy belief of Freemasonry's malicious intent against Islam amongst many Muslims (Lentini 2012).

### **On Theism, Monotheism, Atheism, Agnosticism, Deism and Freemasonry**

Crowder argues that theism means 'minimally, "the existence of a God."' Additionally, he maintains that 'Philosophically..., theism is constituted by a specific set of beliefs concerning God, and God's relationship to the world.' Hence, he posits that theism is more concretely defined 'as "the doctrine that the universe owes its existence, and continuation in existence to the reason and will of a self-existent Being, who is infinitely powerful, wise and good"' (Crowder 1999b: 866-67).

For Ellwood, 'Monotheistic religions are those professing belief in one all-powerful and personal God, and no other gods.' He points out that these include the three Great Monotheisms of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, but that 'Zoroastrianism, Sikhism, and in a sense bhaktic Hinduism and Amidist Buddhism' are also within this category, and that 'overtones of monotheism appear in [the notion of] the primitive high god and in non-dualist Hinduism and Buddhism' (Ellwood 1982: 252). Ellwood also claims that the monotheisms also share their origins in the Axial Age in which human attitudes towards the divine and history transcended from beliefs in the supernatural power of seasonal changes to a specific deity or several distinct deities. For Ellwood, the Monotheisms are also associated with great founders and prophets. The Monotheisms have linear conceptions of time (hence, beginnings and endings). They believe in messiahs who emerge at times of crisis and have saved or will bring salvation to their believers. Monotheisms have often formed the basis of or are among the reasons used to legitimate the foundation of states or nations. Nonetheless, Ellwood infers that they have contradictory properties: Monotheisms claim to be universal faiths—open to all, but that their believers are chosen people or an elect who alone are either favoured by the deity or will gain salvation through their unique and truthful beliefs (Ellwood 1982: 255-56).

Theistic, and especially Monotheistically oriented candidates would be well accommodated within The Craft. They espouse belief in a deity. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of Brethren would belong to these creeds. Indeed of the 7 VSLs that Freemasonry currently recognizes, 5 are for Monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Parseeism/Parsiism and Sikhism. Nonetheless, Freemasonry also recognizes the Hindus' *Gita* and *The Dhammapada* (Mahayana Buddhism) (Grand Lodge of Iowa, n.d.)

Three other belief orientations are very strongly rooted in science and nature. As we will recall the study of nature and science are very strongly revered within Freemasonry, and are emphasized in the Second degree.

Agnosticism, a term coined by Thomas Huxley in 1869, posits that without sufficient empirical evidence for or to the contrary, it is impossible to prove with certainty the existence or not of a Supreme Being. Crowder writes that Huxley made these remarks as a way to defuse religious and secular tensions on the notions of God and science. However, he argues that agnosticism has lost this principled and philosophical connotation and now generally refers to ‘a kind of “don’t know”’ on religious matters (Crowder 1999a: 18-19).

Traditionally, if someone who is agnostic inquired about membership in Freemasonry, we would probably inform him that it would be best for him to wait before seriously considering joining. He would need to identify a Volume of Sacred Law (VSL). If he did not believe in a specific path, then he might be violating his own conscience by attempting to adhere to principles to which he does not adhere. That he may also be demeaning both a faith and the Craft—even if unintentionally—should he decide to join and take an oath on someone’s VSL is a distinct possibility. Therefore, a Brother would normally advise the individual, regardless of his positive demeanour and attitude that until he can reconcile with a specific set of religious beliefs, and accept a single volume of sacred law he should not seek membership.

However, as WBro Richmond perceptively queried in these pages in last year’s *Transactions*, perhaps we should reconsider such old ways: ‘Should a Humanist be excluded from the lodge? A believer in Nature and Science with a devotion to human interests? A good subject for debate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, maybe?.’ Hence, he argued convincingly, that ‘...we as an organisation have to reflect on the religious aspects of our rituals if we wish to remain relevant in the coming years’ (Richmond 2013: 19, 20).

Atheism comprises a complex set of beliefs, non-beliefs and actions. For Baggini, an atheist philosopher and journalist (2003: 3), atheism ‘is the belief that there is no God or gods.’ Prothero, a professor of comparative theology, however, argues that ‘theoretically, atheists deny the existence of all gods, but as a practical matter, can deny only the gods they know’ (Prothero 2009: 318). Baggini maintains that atheism is grounded in nature, and in particular, the observation of nature. Atheists’ primary rule is that only those things which can be observed in the natural, as opposed to the supernatural, can be said to exist (Baggini 2003: 4-7). According to leading atheist commentator Richard Dawkins, atheists are (2006: 14),

philosophical naturalists...who believe [sic] there is nothing beyond the natural, physical world, no supernatural creative intelligence lurking behind the observable universe, so no soul that outlasts the body and no miracles—except in the sense of natural phenomena that we don’t yet understand. If there is something that appears to lie beyond the natural world as it is now imperfectly understood, we hope eventually to understand it and embrace it within the natural.

Despite this scientific orientation, and its grounding in natural processes, atheism has been associated with diabolism or a staunch anti-religious position. This is largely because for centuries Christianity persecuted pagan religions, which were nature worshipping religions, but they were associated with Satan. Thereafter, various Church hierarchies associated witches with Satanic and heretical cults that sought to obliterate Christianity (Demos 2008). Hence, there is a long history of associations between atheism and Satanism, suggesting that those who do not believe in God are in fact evil.

This could not be further from the truth. Baggini suggests that atheism, or at least individual atheists purport moral codes because they are predicated on reason, and reason

dictates that it is beneficial to individuals concerned and society more broadly to treat others well, utilize resources wisely, be kind to human and non-human sentient beings. Moreover, he stresses that the only antagonism, indeed if it could be called that, that most atheists harbour towards religion is that they reject the notion of a Supreme being that created and guides the universe (Baggini 2003: 92). The late Christopher Hitchens pointed out that he never encountered ‘an ethical statement made or an action performed by a believer that could not have been made or performed by a non-believer’, and that ‘the so-called Golden Rule is innate in us or is innate except in the sociopaths who do not care about others and the psychotics who take pleasure from cruelty’ (Hitchens 2007: xiv; xvii).

Atheists see contemporary religion as irrational. However, they noted that historically, they played a role in helping humans advance in knowledge. Indeed, while he would have been numbered among the more militant, anti-theist atheists, Hitchens argued that at one time, religion was humanity’s ‘first (and worst) attempt to make sense of reality’ (Hitchens 2007: xvii). However, both he and Baggini note that it was necessary for humanity to proceed from religion to make scientific progress and strive to elevate their potential for unrestricted development (Baggini 2003: 111; Hitchens 2007: xxi).

However, Prothero sees some contradictions amongst atheists. Despite harbouring suspicions, derision and in some cases hate towards religion, he maintains that they are paradoxically very much like a religion. It will be recalled that Appleby indicated that religions comprise a creed, cult, community of believers and code of conduct. He observes that atheism encompasses three of these, with the exception of an object of worship (Prothero 2009: 324-25).

Moreover, both Prothero and Baggini point out that the New Atheism as espoused by individuals such as Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens constitutes a form of dogmatic secular fundamentalism, exhibiting all of the hallmarks of religiously oriented intolerance. They posit that this New Atheism, not only denies the existence of God, but argues that religion is the basis of malevolent activity. Baggini considers such approaches to constitute a ‘militant atheism’ that requires more than just strong disagreement with religion—it requires something verging on hatred and is characterized by a desire to wipe out all forms of religious belief’ (Baggini 2003: 101). Prothero contends that this is an ‘angry atheism’ in which some identify themselves as ‘Brights’ to distinguish themselves from theists, whom they view as far less intelligent, that ‘their atheism is oppressive and evangelistic—on the attack and courting converts’, and that every refusal of a person of faith to come over to the atheist side is viewed not as a principled disagreement but as evidence of stupidity or worse (Prothero 2009: 319, 322-23). For Dawkins, who has self-ascribed as a ‘Bright’, ‘atheism nearly always indicates a healthy independence of mind, and indeed a healthy mind’ (Dawkins 2006: 3). Nonetheless, while scathing towards religion, Hitchens is highly critical of such ‘conceit’ as identifying as a ‘Bright’ (Hitchens 2009:5). Nonetheless, he labeled himself an ‘anti-theist’ because he both denied any divine existence and instead emphasized that, notwithstanding religion’s contribution to literature, which must be taught and revered, it produced nothing but ill-effects. Indeed, he conveyed notions of illness and disease in his writings. For instance, he referred to ‘the bacili’ of human pathologies from human sacrifice, negative attitudes towards sex, homophobia, war and genocide that were located within, and spawned from the sacred texts (Hitchens 2007: xiv, xxii, xxiii).

It would be safe to say that the reverence for nature that atheists like Baggini espouse would be shared by many Freemasons. Hence, such atheists like him, would be welcome for an evening in the South for philosophical discussions, and very possibly the types of individuals that WBro Richmond suggested we reconsider as prospective Brethren. Nonetheless, the anti-theists or militant atheists would really have not much common ground

with Freemasons. Nonetheless, they might make for engaging visiting speakers to whom we might open up the South on occasions for lively debates and exchanges.

Also maligned and misunderstood is Deism. Deism emerged during the 17<sup>th</sup> Century in the UK and Europe, and eventually their colonies, and began to become more prominent, but was still considered radical throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Deism generally posits that there is a God, in the sense of a Supreme Being who created the universe, but that it is a non-interventionist entity (Edwards 1999: 207). More importantly, Deism is a way to reconcile science and religion, using the empirical medium of nature as a means of proof of the divine's existence. Ethan Allen, one of the heroes of the American War of Independence was a leading proponent of Deism (although his work on Deism was published very long after his death). He argued, 'We are certain that God is a rational, wise, understanding Being, because he has in degree made us so, and his wisdom, power and goodness is visible to us in his creation and governance of the world' (Allen 1854 [2011]: 14).

Perhaps the most influential Deist text, however, is Thomas Paine's three-part *The Age of Reason* (Paine 1796a; Paine 1796b; Paine 1819a). Paine wrote the tract in response to religious persecution during the Terror following the French Revolution. For Paine there was no doubt that God existed. In the Third installment he states,

There is no man that believes in revealed religion stronger than I do; but it is not the reveries of the Old and New Testament, nor of the Koran [sic], that I dignify with that sacred title. That which is revelation to me, exists in something which no human mind can invent, no human hand can counterfeit or alter.

*The Word of God* is the *creation* we behold; and this is the word of God revealeth to man all that is necessary for man to know of his Creator.

Do we want to contemplate his power? We see it in the immensity of his creation.

Do we want to contemplate his wisdom? We see it in the unchangeable order by which the incomprehensible whole is governed.

Do we want to contemplate his munificence? We see it in the abundance with which he fills the earth.

Do we want to contemplate his mercy? We see it in his not withholding that abundance, even from the unthankful.

Do we want to contemplate his will, so far as it respects man? The goodness he shews to all, is a lesson for our conduct to each other.

In fine—Do we want to know what God is? Search not in the book called the scripture, which any human hand might make, or any imposter invent; but the scripture called creation' (Paine 1819a: 49).

Indeed, his treatise is grounded in serious religious principles and convictions. In Part I, he begins by stating,

I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life.

I believe in the equality of man, and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavouring to make our fellow creatures happy.

I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish Church, the Roman Church, by the Greek Church, the Turkish Church [Islam. At the time he wrote the Caliphate was centred in the Ottoman Empire-PL], by the Protestant Church that I know of. My mind is my own Church. All national institutions of Churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit. I do not mean by this declaration to condemn those who believe otherwise (Paine 1796a: 3-4).

Paine criticized the notion that all of the monotheisms were based on revelations. However, he argued that the only revelation that could be considered valid was the first. 'Revelation, when applied to religion, means something communicated *immediately* from God to man.' He stated emphatically that, it is revelation to the first person only, and *hearsay* to every other; and consequently, they are not obliged to believe it' (Paine 1796a: 5. Original emphasis).

Hence, in the second part, after exhaustively examining historical inconsistencies in the Old and New Testaments, Paine claims, ‘if we consider the nature of our condition here, we must see there is no occasion for such a thing as a revealed religion’ (Paine 1796b: 79). Instead, he notes that,

Deism then teaches us, without the possibility of being deceived all that is necessary or proper to be known. The Creation is the Bible of the deist. He there reads, in the hand writing of the Creator himself, the certainty of his existence; and the immutability of his power, and all other Bibles and Testaments are to him forgeries (Paine 1796b: 79).

However, he also argued that,

the belief in God is so weakened by being mixed with the strange fable of the Christian creed, and with the wild adventures related in the Bible, and the obscurity and obscene nonsense of the Testament, that the mind of man is bewildered as in a fog.... The notion of a Trinity of Gods has enfeebled the belief of *one* God (Paine 1796b: 79. Original emphasis).

Indeed, Paine and Deism more broadly received serious attacks from both theists and atheists for their positions. Shortly after Paine published *The Age of Reason*, R. Watson, the Lord Bishop of Landaff attacked him.

I begin with your preface. You therein state—that you had long had an intention of publishing your thoughts upon religion, that that you had originally reserved it for a later period in life—I hope there is no want of charity in saying, that it would have been fortunate for the Christian world, had your life been terminated before you had fulfilled your intention. In accomplishing your purpose, you will have unsettled the faith of thousands rooted from the minds of the unhappy virtues all their comfortable assurance of a future recompense; have contributed in the minds of the filigrations all their fears of future punishment; you will have given the reins to the domination of every passion, and have thereby contributed to the introduction of the public insecurity, and of the private unhappiness, usually and almost necessarily accompanying a state of corrupted morals (Watson 1797: 4).

Paine’s former comrade in the American War of Independence Samuel Adams also took him to task for the book. He accused Paine of writing a “‘*defence of infidelity*”” (Adams cited in Paine 1858: 293. Original emphasis). However, Paine defended himself by explaining to Adams that, ‘The people of France were running headlong into atheism, and I had the work translated and published in their own language to stop them in that career, and fix them to the first article...of every man’s creed, who has any creed at all, I believe in God’ (Paine 1858: 295).

Moreover, Paine also remarked that although he was critical of Christianity,

Nothing that is here said can apply, even with the most distant disrespect, to the *real* character of Jesus Christ. He was a virtuous and amiable man. The morality that he preached and practiced was of the most benevolent kind; and though similar systems of morality had been preached by Confucius and by some of the Greek philosophers, many years before, by the Quakers since and by many good men in all ages, it has not been exceeded (Paine 1796a: 7. Original emphasis).

Indeed, the Deists’ belief in the goodness, and especially humanity in Jesus Christ, is probably best exemplified in Thomas Jefferson’s *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, commonly referred to as *The Jefferson Bible* (Jefferson, n.d.), which removed all references to prophecies about Christ as a Messiah, his miracles and all other supernatural content, to focus solely on those passages that highlighted his benevolence as a person. Hence, the book emphasized both the rational and natural.

While theists attacked Paine and deists for what they believed to be their denial or denigration of religion, especially Christianity, atheists critiqued them for not basing their beliefs on science and empirical evidence. Percy Bysshe Shelley professed that there was ‘no evidence of the existence of a God from the principles of reason’ as deists purported.’ Moreover, he was adamant that contrary to the Deists’ argument which posited that ‘Creation is your Bible’, that ‘it is easier to suppose that the Universe has existed from all eternity, than to conceive an eternal being capable of creating it’ (Shelley 2007: 51, 56). For Dawkins,

a theist believes in a supernatural intelligence who, in addition to his work of creating the universe in the first place, is still around to oversee and influence the subsequent fate of his initial creation. In many theistic systems, the deity is intimately involved in human affairs. He answers prayers; forgives or punishes sins; intervenes in the world by performing miracles; frets about good and bad deeds, and knows when we do them (or even *think* of doing them). A deist too, believes in a supernatural intelligence, but one whose activities were confined up to setup the laws that govern the universe in the first place: the deist god never intervenes thereafter, and certainly has no specific interest in human affairs....Deists differ from theists in that their God does not answer prayers, is not interested in sins or confessions, does not read our thoughts and does not intervene with capricious miracles....Deism is watered-down theism (Dawkins 2006: 18).

These points are well and good. However, how does Deism relate more specifically to Freemasonry? First and foremost, Deism and Freemasonry share what Paine refers to as the creed of the Universal religion: ‘I believe in God.’ Hence, Deism would be consistent with Masonic principles. However, there are other reasons why there are relationships between Deism and Freemasonry, especially during the first few generations of the latter’s existence. Deism was prominent amongst the revolutionary elite that led the American War of Independence.

Second, there were consistencies between Masonic and Deistic philosophies and values amongst the revolutionary elite during the American War of Independence and the early years of the US, commonly known as the ‘Founding Fathers’. George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe and, of course Thomas Paine were Deists (Holmes 2006: 50-51). Therefore, given these individuals’ stature there is a belief that Deism was Freemasonry’s the main religious orientation. There is tension as to the extent to which the Founding Fathers may have been Deists or Christians. Suffice it to say that while most were Christians, there is still quite a bit of Deist-inspired language and belief in the bedrock of the US early documents such as the Declaration of Independence, referring to God in neutral, deistic terms such as ‘Providence’ and avoiding direct references to Jesus Christ. America’s founding principles and the beliefs, such as freedom of religion and not establishing an official church reflect Deistic thought. Such beliefs were and clearly are consistent with Masonic thought. Also, to paraphrase Holmes, given that Deism was cutting-edge thought during the time, and that many of these individuals would have been in their early adulthood, it would have been doubtful if they had not been influenced by it to some degree (Holmes 2006: 50). Also, as many members of the social elite in the American colonies were also Freemasons at that time, it is therefore not surprising that these associations between Deism and Freemasonry have been invoked.

Moreover, Morse provides further evidence that there were relationships between Masons, Deists and the foundation of America. At least two of the Founders—Washington and Franklin—were also high ranking Freemasons. Morse indicates that even the idea of a United States had its origins amongst Freemasons. Before the American War of Independence, two Freemasons, (Daniel Case and Benjamin Franklin) suggested a union of all colonies to defend against French and Indians. General George Washington, the commander of the Continental Army normally gave command positions within its structure to

Freemasons (this did not extend, however, to those in various militias), because, it is believed that because they could maintain their oaths concerning Freemasonry's secrets could be considered to be trustworthy. Morse also notes that Colonial America demonstrated great diversity in social structures, governance, etc. However, Freemasonry appeared to be the only institution or organisation that was universal to all thirteen colonies. Hence, it played a very important unifying force in the early days of the revolutionary, then post-revolutionary country (Morse 1946: 211, 212; 215). For most people, this would be evidence that Freemasonry played a strong, benevolent and guiding role in the foundation of the United States and paved the way for its system of freedoms. However, for some, such information suggests that the US was founded as part of a Masonic plot.

Paine also wrote a bit about Freemasonry in a posthumously published essay. In it, he strongly critiqued Anderson's historical treatment of the Craft's origins as 'an obscenity'. However, he also declared that Freemasonry, like Christianity, originated from the Druids, or at least they all owed their origins to the heliocentric beliefs that emerged in Ancient Egypt (Paine 1819b: 46).

The Christian religion and Masonry have one and the same common origin, both are derived from the worship of the sun; the difference between their origin is, that the Christian religion is a parody of the worship of the sun, in which they put a man whom they call Christ, in the place of the sun, and pay him the same adoration which was originally paid to the sun...' (Paine 1819b: 47).

In addition, he pointed out that as the Druids worshiped the sun, so was it present within Masonic lodges from its place on the mosaic tiles, and (as then) on Freemasons' aprons. He also mentioned that the notion of Freemasonry's Druidic origins were not inconsistent with what would have occurred in King Solomon's temple from where, he argued, some individuals worshiped the sun, or performed ceremonies in its honour, and that this eventually made its way throughout the world after the Jewish dispersal. He also claimed that Freemasons' reliance on secrecy was derived from the Druids, as they had to operate clandestinely to protect themselves from persecution first from the Romans, then from Christians (Paine 1819b: 47, 48, 52, 56). While Mackey and McClenachan were critical of Paine, arguing that he 'disgraced himself' by his writings on Christianity, they also noted that his treatment of Masonry and Druidry showed 'considerable ingenuity' for someone who was so 'little acquainted with Freemasonry' (Mackey and McClenachan 1912b: 541). However, in regard to this latter point, it is unclear whether they were praising him for either or both his historical accuracy or innovative methodology, or suggesting that his approach was very wide of the mark.

Modern Deism, however, is much more confronting than the classical Deism of Jefferson, Paine and others. While Paine, for example critiqued the non-rational bases of religion, but still held their believers in high esteem, as well as central figures such as Jesus Christ, contemporary Deists, such as those from the World Union of Deists are the very similar in attitude in demeanour to members of organized faiths and atheists as the 'angry atheists' or anti-theists are towards religiously oriented individuals, ridiculing them for not seeing in nature that there is a God, and that what the holy books write about a deity is fabrication and irrational (Johnson 2009).

Mackey and McClenachan, however, suggest that Deism's role and influence in the Craft has been exaggerated, particularly in relation to the time of its founding. They write that in the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century, Freemasonry 'demanded almost a Christian belief—at all events, a Christian allegiance', but that 'it is now more tolerant, and Deism presents no disqualification for initiation' (Mackey and McClenachan 1912a: 204). This would remain so today, so long

as the candidate agrees, ‘not to be an enthusiast, persecutor or slanderer of religion’ (UGLV n.d. [2009?]: 75). Hence, those who might espouse views of some of the World Union of Deists might not be the most congenial of Brethren.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the aforementioned, there are clearly overlaps between elements of Theism, Monotheism, Deism, Agnosticism and Atheism. There is nothing in any of these theological or anti-theological orientations that precludes seeing goodness in all individuals, regardless of origins or station, charity and respect for education. Nonetheless, as Freemasonry is predicated on belief in some creative force or Supreme Being and mandates that this faith must be represented in a Volume of Sacred Law, atheists are currently prohibited from membership. However, so too would agnostics. Traditionally, the Craft’s restriction has not been intended to cast aspersions on their overall characters. Rather, it reflected that they did not share a core principle with those who are members of the Craft. However, in light of WBro Richmond’s suggestions, perhaps it may be time to reconsider these provisions. Similarly, there may be some Deists who over the years would have been willing to join, but did not because they may have felt somewhat restricted, as the VSLs that are currently recognized do not represent their true beliefs—despite the fact that like all Freemasons they share the creed of the universal religion of ‘I believe in God’. Hence, perhaps there should be some effort expended in seriously considering including books such as *The Age of Reason* as a VSL. It is true that it is critical of religion. *However, unlike many of the Volumes of Sacred Law, it does not exhibit or exalt violence towards those who are not of its faith—even under specific contexts.* Moreover, in light of the pagan and heathen revivals that are occurring in many European countries and North America and Australia, it might be worth considering whether some of those adherents’ sacred texts might be included amongst the recognized Volumes of Sacred Law. Given that most pagans are indeed women, it is doubtful that Freemasonry could expect that it would attract many members from such belief systems. However, the founder of the modern pagan revival, Gerald Gardner was a Mason—there is still debate as to whether he was a Freemason or Co-Mason. Nonetheless, he introduced three degrees into his religious system, based on Freemasonry, as well as terminology such as cowans to refer to outsiders, to name but a few such matters. Hence, amongst some men who are members of another ‘Craft’, as pagans affectionately call their religion, they may express some affinity towards our Craft, and perhaps they too could be encouraged to become Brethren. In these respects, I strongly support WBro Richmond’s position on rethinking some of our ideas about religion.

### **Postscript**

Henotheism is perhaps another matter that could be considered in relation to the Craft and its attitudes towards and recognition of religious matters. Historically, henotheism constituted a form of monotheism in name, but polytheism in practice. In henotheistic systems, such as those that existed in Ancient Rome and Greece, individuals recognized a plurality of gods, but also acknowledged that there was a high god to whom believers should devote most reverence and worship. Such would have been the case with respectively Jupiter and Zeus. There were also times in which various rulers would have favoured certain gods (and sometimes goddesses) over others. Hence, there was a degree of religious dynamism in henotheistic systems (Papathomas 2002). However, new understandings of henotheism seem to reflect the manner in which religious life functions *de facto* in contemporary liberal democratic systems: individuals worship one deity, but do not exclude the existence of others (Adler 1997: 258), or more appropriately, they follow one path, but see and appreciate the

validity in other faith systems. Moreover, such beliefs are upheld by law, with the state neither favouring nor persecuting any religious belief. In this respect, Freemasonry may most accurately be described as one which tends to exhibit tendencies that reflect this modified understanding of henotheism.

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