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What is Freemasonry

Freemasonry is one of the world's oldest secular fraternal societies. The following information is intended to explain Freemasonry as it is practised under the United Grand Lodge of England, which administers Lodges of Freemasons in England and Wales and in many places overseas.

The explanation may correct some misconceptions.

Freemasonry is a society of men concerned with moral and spiritual values. Its members are taught its precepts by a series of ritual dramas, which follow ancient forms, and use stonemasons' customs and tools as allegorical guides.

The Essential Qualification for Membership

The essential qualification for admission into and continuing membership is a belief in a Supreme Being.

Membership is open to men of any race or religion who can fulfil this essential qualification and who are of good repute.

Freemasonry and Religion

Freemasonry is not a religion, nor is it a substitute for religion. Its essential qualification opens it to men of many religions and it expects them to continue to follow their own faith. It does not allow religion to be discussed at its meeting.

The Three Great Principles

For many years Freemasons have followed three great principles:

- Brotherly Love - Every true Freemason will show tolerance and respect for the opinions of others and behave with kindness and understanding to his fellow creatures.
- Relief - Freemasons are taught to practise charity and to care, not only for their own, but also for the community as a whole, both by charitable giving, and by voluntary efforts and works as individuals.
- Truth - Freemasons strive for truth, requiring high moral standards and aiming to achieve them in their own lives.

Freemasons believe that these principles represent a way of achieving higher standards in life.

Charity

From its earliest days, Freemasonry has been concerned with the care of orphans, the sick and the aged.

This work continues today. In addition, large sums are given to national and local charities.

Freemasonry and Society

Freemasonry demands from its members a respect for the law of the country in which a man works and lives.

Its principles do not in any way conflict with its members' duties as citizens, but should strengthen them in fulfilling their public and private responsibilities.

The use by a Freemason of his membership to promote his own or anyone else's business, professional or personal interests is condemned, and is contrary to the conditions on which he sought admission to Freemasonry.

His duty as a citizen must always prevail over any obligation to other Freemasons, and any attempt to shield a Freemason who has acted dishonourably or unlawfully is contrary to this prime duty.

Secrecy

The secrets of Freemasonry are concerned with its traditional modes of recognition. It is not a secret society, since all members are free to acknowledge their membership and will do so in response to enquiries for respectable reasons. Its constitutions and rules are available to the public. There is no secret about any of its aims and principles. Like many other societies, it regards some of its internal affairs as private matters for its members.

Freemasonry and Politics

Freemasonry is non-political, and the discussion of politics at Masonic meetings is forbidden.

Other Masonic Bodies

Freemasonry is practised under many independent Grand Lodges with standards similar to those set by the United Grand Lodge of England.

There are some Grand Lodges and other apparently Masonic bodies that do not meet these standards, e.g. that do not require a belief in a Supreme Being, or that allow or encourage their members as such to participate in political matters.

These Grand Lodges and bodies are not recognised by the United Grand Lodge of England as being Masonically regular, and Masonic contact with them is forbidden.

Conclusion

A Freemason is encouraged to do his duty first to his God (by whatever name he is known) through his faith and religious practice; and then, without detriment to

his family and those dependent on him, to his neighbour through charity and service.

None of these ideas is exclusively Masonic, but all should be universally acceptable. Freemasons are expected to follow them.

What is Freemasonry?

Freemasonry teaches moral lessons and self-knowledge through participation in a progression of allegorical two-part plays, which are learnt by heart and performed within each lodge.

Freemasonry offers its members an approach to life which seeks to reinforce thoughtfulness for others, kindness in the community, honesty in business, courtesy in society and fairness in all things. Members are urged to regard the interests of the family as paramount but importantly Freemasonry also teaches and practices concern for people, care for the less fortunate and help for those in need.

Why do people join and remain members?

People become Freemasons for a variety of reasons, some as the result of family tradition, others upon the introduction of a friend or out of a curiosity to know what it is all about.

Those who become active members and who grow in Freemasonry do so principally because they enjoy it. They enjoy the challenges and fellowship that Freemasonry offers. There is more to it, however, than just enjoyment.

Participation in the dramatic presentation of moral lessons and in the working of a lodge provides a member with a unique opportunity to learn more about himself and encourages him to live in such a way that he will always be in search of becoming a better man, not better than someone else but better than he himself would otherwise be and therefore an exemplary member of society.

Each Freemason is required to learn and show humility through initiation. Then, by progression through a series of degrees he gains insight into increasingly complex moral and philosophical concepts, and accepts a variety of challenges and responsibilities which are both stimulating and rewarding. The structure and working of the lodge and the sequence of ceremonial events, which are usually

followed by social gatherings, offer members a framework for companionship, teamwork, character development and enjoyment of shared experiences.

What promises do Freemasons take?

New members make solemn promises concerning their conduct in the lodge and society. These promises are similar to those taken in court or upon entering the armed services or many other organisations. Each member also promises to keep confidential the traditional methods of proving he is a Freemason which he would use when visiting a lodge where he is not known.

The much publicised 'traditional penalties' for failure to observe these undertakings were removed from the promises in 1986. They were always symbolic not literal and refer only to the pain any decent man should feel at the thought of violating his word.

Members also undertake not to make use of their membership for personal gain or advancement; failure to observe this principle or otherwise to fall below the standards expected of a Freemason can lead to expulsion.

Who can join?

Membership is open to men of all faiths who are law-abiding, of good character and who acknowledge a belief in God. Freemasonry is a multi-racial and multi-cultural organisation. It has attracted men of goodwill from all sectors of the community into membership. There are similar Masonic organisations for women.

Is Freemasonry a religion?

Freemasonry is not a religion. It has no theology and does not teach any route to salvation. A belief in God, however, is an essential requirement for membership and Freemasonry encourages its members to be active in their own religions as well as in society at large.

Although every lodge meeting is opened and closed with a prayer and its ceremonies reflect the essential truths and moral teachings common to many of the world's great religions, no discussion of religion is permitted in lodge meetings.

Is Freemasonry a secret society?

Freemasonry is not a secret society, but lodge meetings, like meetings of many other social and professional associations, are private occasions open only to members.

Freemasons are encouraged to speak openly about their membership, while remembering that they undertake not to use it for their own or anyone else's advancement. As members are sometimes the subject of discrimination which may adversely affect their employment or other aspects of their lives, some Freemasons are understandably reticent about discussing their membership. In common with many other national organisations, Grand Lodge neither maintains nor publishes a list of members and will not disclose names or member's details without their permission.

In circumstances where a conflict of interest might arise or be perceived to exist or when Freemasonry becomes an issue, a Freemason must declare an interest.

The rules and aims of Freemasonry are available to the public. The Masonic Year Book, also available to the public, contains the names of all national office-holders and lists of all lodges with details of their meeting dates and places.

The meeting places and halls used by Freemasons are readily identifiable, are listed in telephone directories and in many areas are used by the local community for activities other than Freemasonry. Freemason's Hall in London is open to the public and 'open days' are held in many provincial centres.

The rituals and ceremonies used by Freemasons to pass on the principles of Freemasonry to new members were first revealed publicly in 1723. They include the traditional forms of recognition used by Freemasons essentially to prove their identity and qualifications when entering a Masonic meeting. These include handshakes which have been much written about and can scarcely be regarded as truly secret today; for medieval Freemasons, they were the equivalent of a 'pin number' restricting access only to qualified members.

Many thousands of books have been written on the subject of Freemasonry and are readily available to the general public. Freemasonry offers spokesmen and briefings for the media and provides talks to interested groups on request. Freemasons are proud of their heritage and happy to share it.

Is Freemasonry involved in politics?

Freemasonry is definitely not a political organisation, it has no political agenda, and discussion of politics is not permitted at lodge meetings.

Freemasonry naturally tends to attract those with a concern for people and a sense of social responsibility and purpose. There are members, therefore, who are involved in politics at local, national and international level. Equally there are members who take an active interest in non-Masonic charitable organisations and other community groups.

Is Freemasonry involved in the community?

From its earliest days, Freemasonry has been involved in charitable activities, and since its inception it has provided support for many widows and orphans of Freemasons as well as for others within the community.

All monies raised for charity are drawn from amongst Freemasons, their families and friends, while grants and donations are made to Masonic and non-Masonic charities alike.

Over the past five years alone Freemasonry has raised more than £75m for a wide range of charitable purposes including those involved in medical research, community care, education and work with young people.

Freemasonry has an enviable record of providing regular and consistent financial support to individual charities over long periods while at the same time making thousands of grants to local charities, appeals and projects throughout England and Wales each year. For the future, opportunities to obtain or provide matched funding are periodically examined with a view to enhancing the impact of the support Freemasonry can give to specific projects. The personal generosity of Freemasons and the collective fundraising efforts of almost 8,000 lodges, however, will continue to determine the contribution Freemasonry makes within the community.
