

How free are we within Freemasonry?

A discursive opinion piece.

Background

This paper was inspired by a lodge meeting in Turkey where a newly initiated brother had been given a research task to present a paper around this topic before his passing, it seems we get off lightly here in the UK! Turkish lodge meetings often focus on a topic of masonic interest and the festive boards are focused on masonic topic-based debates (with less toasting). Whilst it may be daunting, new members are fully involved from the start and retention and engagement is positive. Here I will explore a few thoughts around freedom (and its limitations) within freemasonry. If we are to define free as the Oxford dictionary does as being able to do what we want or wish, how might this apply to Freemasonry?

Historical Understandings

Broadly speaking there is a consensus that Freemasonry originates from operative stonemasons who built the cathedrals of Europe. During the 16th century there were restrictions to control the movement of workers around Europe (by various leaders) with the exception of stone masons who were free from these restrictions – hence they were free of their craft. However an entered apprentice was perhaps not so free of his craft as he had no wages, could not accept work on its own and had no voice to vote. In some senses the operative masons were only free within their level and brethren had to progress and learn their craft to move between degrees. This is replicated within speculative freemasonry - there is no freedom to move between degrees until masons have advanced through them.

Present Understandings

Outsiders to freemasonry may get the wrong idea and have a different concept of our freedom as freemasons, so it is important to dispel myths. Freemasons are of course not free to break the law of the land. They must also observe the constitution and any lodge by-laws.

Candidates must come voluntarily of their own free will, but in lodge brethren are not free to do what we want or wish. There are behavioural expectations and procedures which are taught through the degrees and the ritual work. We are obliged not to disclose the labours of the lodge or the secrets entrusted to us. We are not free to discuss religion or politics and it is our duty to keep the harmony within the lodge. We have to be properly prepared and dressed for lodge and must show respect to the officers.

At face value it may seem we are not free but bound by constitutions, dress codes, duties and obligations. However perhaps the masonic freedoms are to learn and teach the ideals of morality, justice, brotherly love and charity. This will help to develop us personally and extend and broaden our philosophical horizons. Perhaps freemasons are free to explore the principles of the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of god, or liberty, equality and fraternity promoting harmony and peace in the wider world.

Future Predictions

The rise of the internet and advancement in digital communications has made information more readily available to the public. On the one hand this has led to much mythmaking which is not helpful but on the other it has perhaps opened up wider opportunities. The recent lockdown has meant that we have moved to further communication online so perhaps as we navigate our future, what freedoms (or further restrictions) could this bring? Could we perhaps be as free in the digital world as our operative predecessors were in the material world?

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