



Notes from a Preceptor's Handbook

A Preceptor:

(OED) 1440 A.D. from Latin *praeceptor*

one who instructs, a teacher, a tutor, a mentor

Some Quiet Reflections on taking the **Obligation**

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The following pages are offered to open up a discussion on a topic with which many of us feel uncomfortable. It is written from the perspective of a Lodge Chaplain of many years' duration, as a Pastoral Assistant in the Anglican Church and as a member of a Cathedral team who, for over 25 years, has discussed meaning and purpose with many thousands of visitors to Salisbury Cathedral.

In the absence of meaningful religious instruction today in the home or school (or church) or even adequate opportunity in busy adult lives for quiet reflection, a self-awareness of our spiritual nature has for so many become, at best, ill-defined and, at worst, disarmingly absent. (The significance of - or relationships between - a spiritual nature, a Supreme Being or God, a religious faith, Church worship and a moral code can become equally blurred and lie well beyond the present discussion).

Spiritual Awareness

The proportion of the population worshipping regularly has seemingly plummeted to about 6-8 % and less than half of our population profess a positive religious belief. Within such a generally secular or agnostic society the requirement for a meaningful religious oath or obligation therefore presents many prospective Masonic candidates with a serious challenge at interview. When questioned about '*Belief in the Supreme Being*' or '*Acceptance of a Sacred Volume*' both the question and its answer can become (mutually) misleading.

And yet... ..that candidate may be morally upright, a good citizen, an admirable Mason-in-waiting and – given the opportunity - could well come to accept the significance of the Supreme Being and develop his own spiritual nature through the steady exposure to our rituals and brotherly companionship ...if we can overcome that hurdle of his initial selection

It is suggested, in these circumstances, that when making his Obligation, our Lodges would benefit from being able to offer a candidate the alternative of a Solemn Affirmation to a Religious Oath without any detriment to our standards or principles.

Book of Constitutions

The Book of Constitutions ('Aims and Relationships of the Craft' (1949)) sets out unambiguously at Para. 3: '*the first condition of admission into, and membership of, the Order is a belief in the Supreme Being. This is essential and admits of no compromise*'.

A more recent clarification (2011) has stated: '*All Freemasons are expected to have a religious belief, but Freemasonry... .. deals in a man's relationship with his fellow man not in a man's relationship with his God*'.

Both nonetheless continue to confirm the fundamental requirement of a religious belief.

However we are seeing potential candidates of excellent quality who when asked the question 'Do you believe in a Supreme Being or God?' find a simple answer difficult. At best they may be persuaded to accept that 'possibly there may be something beyond us'. A hard-pressed committee searching for a candidate and seeing a good man sitting before them may well be tempted to accept this as the necessary firm belief in **the** Supreme Being. Why might this present a problem?

The Volume of Sacred Law

The difficulty arises when such a candidate kneels in the East to take an Obligation. For Faiths believing in the Supreme Being there are of course few if any obstacles. Within my own Lodge while a Christian will normally use the Lodge Bible, other Faiths have chosen their own sacred alternative: e.g. the *Torah* (Judaism), *Koran* (Moslem), *Veda* (Hindu) or equivalent. [Although for a Buddhist the *Pauli Canon* might be acceptably sacred, the concept of a Great Architect within the ritual may not.]

However if the Candidate has expressly said he does not believe in the Supreme Being (e.g. Jehovah, 'Our Father', Allah etc.) then the Lodge Bible cannot be sacred to him as a V.S.L. He may respect the Bible, he may revere it as sacred to someone else, but it is not sacred to him. [*Sacred: 'made holy by religious association...'* OED.] Even if he has said he believes in a 'Supreme Being' without identifying the concept any further he will have difficulty in selecting a text that is meaningfully Sacred to him on which he can take an Obligation with integrity.

Religious Oath

Further should he nevertheless be asked to make an Obligation using the Lodge VSL (e.g. the Bible) his hand will be placed on what is to him effectively a block of cellulose and printer's ink? Further, when the Master asks him to repeat the words 'So help me, God... in this my Great and Solemn Obligation...' he is being asked to make a prayer to a God he does not freely accept exists. His kiss of ratification becomes equally meaningless if not distasteful.

Let us take stock. If a 'non-believing' Candidate is asked to undertake such an Obligation on a book that is not sacred to him he may be offending many in the Lodge. More seriously he is being asked, at best, to engage in a form of play acting or, at worst, a deliberate deception. This cannot be a satisfactory foundation for any future career within a community that represents 'a peculiar system of morality' and whose grand principles include 'brotherly love, relief and truth...'

An alternative Affirmation

In his helpful '*Masonic Etiquette Today*', as an alternative to a religious obligation for a Member of the Society of Friends, Graham Redman suggests the adoption of an Affirmation (p.94) offering a modified form of words. Several other Christian groups are equally uncomfortable with a religious Oath as an Obligation. They argue that the Gospels (e.g. Matthew Ch.5 v.34-37) specifically discourage this.

It is suggested that in such circumstances an Affirmation can offer the safeguards we require:

*In law an **affirmation** is a solemn declaration allowed to those who conscientiously object to taking an **oath**. An affirmation has exactly the same legal effect as an oath but is usually taken to avoid the religious implications of an oath; it is thus legally binding but not considered a religious oath.*

Such a precedent suggests a constructive way forward. Where a candidate has a positive religious Faith the situation would remain as at present. Where the candidate **accepts** but cannot **identify** a Being that is Supreme for him nor an appropriate V.S.L. then as an Obligation let him make an Affirmation in lieu of a religious Oath. By this simple step he can remain true to himself and true to his brethren.

Adapting the words of Graham Redman (op.cit.) the conclusion of the Obligation might include the following options:

...These several points I do seriously declare and affirm that I will keep and observe...

...Strengthened by my Affirmation may I be kept steadfast in this my G and S O of an EAFM. (The kiss of ratification would be deleted).

Conclusion

Given a need to continue recruiting candidates of high quality but who lack the spiritual awareness necessary to make a religious oath, some relaxation of the strict observance of para. 3 of the Book of Constitutions would seem desirable. Graham Redman has suggested a way forward. With the tongue of good report – together with a clearly expressed acceptance of an after-life – we could then accept each Candidate as a rough ashlar for future spiritual and moral development within Freemasonry.

These thoughts are offered for wider discussion within each Lodge.