

New Candidates in French Freemasonry

In English lodges, new members are proposed and seconded by brethren of the lodge who are in good standing. The proposers and seconders have to fill up the Grand Lodge Application forms and answer various questions, basically to attest to the good character and suitability of the potential candidates for membership of the Craft. The Candidates are then interviewed by the Committee. The Committee has to ascertain that the Candidates believe in a Supreme Being, have no criminal record and are over the age of 21. The names are then circulated, and at the next meeting, ballots are taken.

How a particular candidate views Freemasonry really depends a lot on his proposer or seconder and on whatever bits of information or dis-information he might get from the Internet or his readings.

Because most lodges look upon having degree workings as the MAIN event in a lodge meeting, virtually any Tom, Dick or Harry, who has never been convicted of any crime and who professes that he has a belief in a Supreme Being, is accepted. To many of them, joining Freemasonry is no different from joining any social club; hence the periodic problems lodges have with alcoholics and bad behaviours.

In theory, the proposer and seconder are supposed to guide the new mason in his Masonic education and path.

When I first joined a French lodge that works the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rites (AASR) Rituals, I was most impressed by the way they select their candidates.

First, there is no proposer or seconder. A new candidate has a sponsor. This simple change in nomenclature implies to the sponsor that he has a responsibility to both the man and the Lodge regarding the candidate's understanding of Freemasonry, and the man's behaviour in Lodge.

After the sponsor has given the name of the potential candidate to the Master, the Master of the Lodge would appoint three independent investigators. No one knows whom he has appointed, and it is bad form to try and find out. The three appointed investigators, each of them do not know who the other two are. All three would then make independent appointments to meet the potential candidate in his home. This would allow them a sense of what kind of person is the potential candidate. If the potential candidate is married, they could ask his wife certain questions as well. The investigators would report on the personality, education, employment, family life and so on of the potential candidate, and give recommendations regarding the suitability of the man for Freemasonry.

The three reports are then read in open lodge by the Master and a ballot is taken. The ballot is not a ballot for initiation; it is a ballot to go to the next stage, a stage called the "Blindfold Examination of the Candidate". If the ballot is successful, the candidate will be informed and requested to present himself at a Lodge meeting.

On the day of the Blindfold Examination, after the lodge is opened and is ready to conduct the examination, the brother, who holds the office in the lodge as "The Expert" will retire from the lodge. There is no such position in English lodge. The Lodge officers in a French lodge under the AASR are different in the most part from Lodge Officers in English lodges. The officers are: the Venerable Master, Senior and Junior Wardens, The Expert, The Master of Ceremony, The Hospitalier, the Guardian (Inner Guard), and the Tyler. There is no exact equivalent in English Freemasonry to the Expert. During the opening of the lodge, he actually has to draw the Tracing Board of the Degree with chalk on a blackboard. During that process, the brethren are supposed to meditate on the significance of the various symbols being drawn. In some other instances, he is like our Deacon, but then in other instances, he is not.

After he has left the Temple, the Expert would blindfold the candidate, who is referred to as the "Profane". He is then led into the lodge, the lights of which have now been dimmed. The profane, blindfolded is then seated in the West.

The Master then says these words to him:

"Good evening Sir, thank you for accepting our invitation to be here tonight. We will now ask you a series of questions. I would like to request you answer these questions frankly and as candidly as possible. They will help us to better know you and better understand your motivation in becoming one with us.

"Please give us your full name and age.

"I will now ask you the first question: Do you believe in God?"

Assuming the Profane answers yes to that first question, the Master could then ask another question or open the questioning to the other brethren. Brethren who want to ask question would raise his hand and the Master would then indicate to him that he could pose the question. He would also begin with, "Good evening Sir", and after the Profane has answered his question, he would say, "Thank you Sir."

As the Brethren are seated in different parts of the Temple, to the candidate, the questions coming to him would seem to have come from different directions. It is quite daunting to have questions being fired at

oneself from all directions of the compass without knowing who the questioners are. That's why it is so important to maintain the proper decorum while asking questions, always begin with "Good evening Sir" and ending with "Thank you Sir."

The questions should be related to clarifying anything in the report as well as trying to understand the spiritual aspirations of the Profane. Examples of the type of questions:

"What is your conception of God or of a Supreme Being?"
"Where is God?"
"What are you searching for in Life?"
"What do you consider to be your weak points?"
"What are your strengths?"
"When was the last time you lied and why?"
"When was the last time you were angry and why?"
"Have you ever disobeyed your parents, if yes, why?"
"What is Death?"
"What do you understand by Eternity?"
"Do you believe in an Afterlife?"
"In your view, what is the purpose of Life?"
"What is mythology?"
"How would you feel if you don't pass this examination? Would you give up trying to join?"
"What is the soul of Man?"
"When was the last time you gave relief to another?"
"When was the last time you cheated? Why?"
"Can you keep a secret?"
"Can you remain silent?"

Questions such as, "Are you a member of the Conservative Party?" or "What are your thoughts of the IRA?" will not be allowed. When a brother has a question which the Master thinks is not proper, he will gavel once and go onto the next question.

When the Master thinks that the questioning is enough, he would give the Grand Sign to signal the end of the Questioning and he would say to the Profane:

"Sir, we would like to thank you for your responses and we will now deliberate further about your request to become one with us. We will keep you informed through your Sponsor about our final conclusions. Thank you Sir and good evening."

The Expert would then lead him out of the Lodge, and once outside, the Expert would ask him, "Sir, what are your first impressions? Do you think it went well?" The Expert will then thank the Profane and tell him he can go home. He would then re-enter the Lodge and tell the brethren what the Profane has said regarding his impression of the Examination. A ballot is then taken. Only if the ballot is favorable will the Profane be then informed to come for Initiation.

It must be emphasized that the exact answers to the questions are not important, except to the first question regarding the Belief in a Supreme Being. The psychological effect on the Candidate is the important part. The Candidate is put on notice that he is joining a fraternity that is in search of some higher spiritual truth. If he becomes a Mason, he will be embarking upon a lifelong journey of searching, searching to understand oneself, searching to understand one's relationship with other men, and searching to understand one's relationship with God. **HE IS NOT JOINING A SOCIAL CLUB.**

One of the requirements of membership in the Craft is a belief in a Supreme Being. Very often the question is asked, why? The most common answer I have heard was that in order to be a good man, one must have a belief in God. The next common answer is that in the ceremony of initiation, the candidate has to take certain obligations on the VSL, and if he doesn't believe in a Supreme Being, that obligation might mean very little to him.

Is there any empirical evidence to support those answers? Is it more likely for a believer in God to be a moral person than an atheist? Is it more likely for a believer in God to keep his obligations than an atheist?

The Federal Bureau of Prisons of the USA keeps records of the religious affiliations of the inmates in its care. In its report in 1997, only 0.21% of the prison inmates were atheist. This is well under the percentage of atheists in the USA, which is commonly estimated to be around 8%-16%. (<http://www.holysmoke.org/icr-pri.htm>). This bit of statistics certainly doesn't support the idea that the religious are more moral than the atheist.

A recent report by the Barna group, a group which is funded by George Barna for research in religious leadership training, and church facilitation, shows that in the USA, the divorce rates among Christians and

atheists were more or less the same at round 33% of couples (<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=295>). Since all marriages involve the taking of an obligation that the man and woman would remain committed to each other till death do them part, that bit of statistics clearly shows that the rate of “breaking one’s obligations” was the same whether or not one has a belief in God.

These are empirical evidence that one cannot deny. Clearly then, the usual reasons given for the requirement for membership in the Craft, that one must have a belief in the existence of a Supreme Being , doesn’t seem to hold much water.

Why then that requirement?

To me that requirement indicates very clearly that the Craft is based on something more than Brotherhood and Fellowship, something more than mere Charity. It is based on something that is spiritual, and for that, one must have a belief in the existence of a Supreme Being. Right at the start of the Masonic career of an Entered Apprentice, he must be made aware that Freemasonry is about a journey, and that journey ends in the spiritual dimension of life. There is not much emphasis on that aspect in English Freemasonry, but the AASR of French lodge certainly emphasizes that.

Is that the reason why French Masonry is increasing by leaps and bounds whereas Anglo-Saxon masonry is declining in numbers?

Perhaps we can ponder on these words of the Pro Grand Master, in his speech to the Cornerstone Society in 2005: *Anglo-Saxon Masonry has strayed from its original purpose and no longer teaches its candidates the fundamental truths which underpin the Craft.*

How many times have we heard very senior brothers saying, “Freemasonry is all about Fellowship.” This turns the Craft into a mere social club.

How many times have we heard this slightly different statement from very senior brothers, “Freemasonry is all about Charity.” This turns the Craft into a service Club.

Only when we remember that the Craft is built on the Fundamental Three Grand Principles of “Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth” can the Craft be the Craft again, and that means all three legs of that tripod must be given equal weight. “Truth”, that points to the spiritual and intellectual aspects of the Craft must be brought back into prominence.

Certainly in Continental Freemasonry, right at the start of the Masonic journey of a candidate, he is made to be aware of the spiritual aspect of the Craft. Perhaps we have something to learn from the French?

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