



FREEMASONRY

Questions and Answers

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Questions and answers

The average Freemason has never really been sure what he can or cannot say about Freemasonry. He has usually therefore played safe and kept quiet. This can easily change.

The first golden rule when explaining Freemasonry to anyone is to avoid Masonic jargon. For example, although we understand what we mean by brotherly love, relief and truth, they mean little to anyone else. A better way of describing them could be to refer to tolerance and understanding of other people, even if their views differ from yours (brotherly love), charity in the widest sense – giving of time and not just money (relief) and striving to make ourselves better citizens through higher standards of conduct (truth).

These sort of answers are obviously not definitive statements but they will give you an idea of how to set about explaining them.

Furthermore, the examples are in no particular order. This is as it should be since people will ask you questions at random. Even if you do not use them for inspiration, they will still nevertheless give you a clearer grasp of the problem, allowing you to formulate your own straightforward replies that you will feel completely comfortable with. Once you feel able to answer any question which might come at you, you will be pleasantly surprised at how enjoyable talking about Freemasonry suddenly becomes.

- ***What is Freemasonry?***

Freemasonry is an ancient, voluntary association of people who believe in high moral and spiritual values. The way its teachings are transmitted is by means of plays, which Freemasons feel make a more profound and satisfying impression.

- ***How did it start?***

The answer is we don't really know. The earliest record of someone becoming a Freemason is that of Elias Ashmole in 1646. Organised Freemasonry began with the founding of the Grand Lodge of England in 1717, the first Grand Lodge in the world. Ireland followed in 1725 and Scotland in 1736. All the regular Grand Lodges in the world trace

themselves back to one or a combination of these three Grand Lodges.

There are two main theories of origin.

The first is that the stonemasons who built castles and cathedrals in the middle ages, had lodges in which they discussed trade affairs. They had simple initiations for apprentices and, as there were no examination certificates or trade union cards, adopted signs and words so that they could demonstrate that they were trained masons in an easier way than carving a specimen to show their skills whenever they moved around from site to site. In the 1600s these lodges began to take in non-operative members as 'gentlemen masons'. Gradually these non-operatives took over the lodges and turned them from operative to free and accepted or speculative lodges.

The other theory is that the group who formed Freemasonry (in the late 1500s and early 1600s) were interested in the promotion of religious and political tolerance in an age of great intolerance, when differences of opinion on these subjects were to lead to a bloody civil war. What they were trying to do was to make better men and build a better world. The old trade guilds provided them with their basic administration of a master, wardens, treasurer and secretary and the old stonemasons' tools with a wealth of symbols to moralise upon. The most well known book would, of course, have been the Bible, the contents of which were known to everyone even if they could not read. The only building described in detail there is King Solomon's temple, which became the basis of the ceremonies.

- *Why the secrecy?*

As it happens Freemasonry is not secret. Where and when we meet are matters of public record (for instance you can easily look up Masonic Halls in the telephone book) as are the aims of Freemasonry. Any one can buy the *Book of Constitutions* which is our rule book. If Freemasonry was a secret society we would hardly be having open days like this with Freemasons willing to show you round and answer your questions.

The only secrets in Freemasonry are the traditional and purely ceremonial means of proving that you are in fact a Freemason - the handshakes and words of popular jokes. They are not important information in themselves and have anyway been routinely 'exposed' every few years since Freemasonry started hundreds of years ago.

They only feature when they are demonstrated in the ceremonies but very occasionally - say when an overseas Freemason visits a Lodge

where he may not be known – they may be used by him as a ceremonial demonstration that he is actually a Freemason. They are certainly not used indiscriminately outside of Lodge meetings.

- *So why secrecy about membership?*

Freemasons can tell anyone they like that they belong. Paradoxically, it is because they don't want people to think they are using it for their own gain that they don't shout it from the rooftops.

- *But you do keep some things secret, don't you?*

We traditionally have kept certain words and signs private, but they have been subject to so many exposures since Freemasonry started that anyone can easily find them by taking a trip to the local library. Besides, the words and signs are solely used as a formal proof of being a Freemason inside Lodges when a Freemason from one Lodge wants to visit another one – hardly very important information that needs to be hushed up.

- *Weren't there bloodthirsty penalties in the ceremonies until outside criticism forced you to get rid of them?*

The promises a Freemason at one time did have physical penalties which were always purely symbolic and had never been carried out. When the ceremonies were developing in the late 1600s and early 1700s it was very common for civil and legal oaths to include physical penalties. Freemasonry simply followed the practice of the times. About 40 years ago some Freemasons began to argue that they were no longer necessary. This resulted in a great debate in Grand Lodge in 1964 and an optional variation in the ceremonies was introduced referring to the penalties as traditional. This did not go far enough for some members, however, and in the 1970s a committee was set up to look into it further. After a lot of market research Grand Lodge voted in 1986 to remove the penalties. This unhappily coincided with criticism from the outside leading to those critics claiming that they had brought about the changes which had in fact happened as a result of 40 years of debate with Freemasonry itself.

- *Why do you swear to help each other regardless of anything else?*

We don't. All Freemasons are strictly taught that they must never use their membership to advance their own or anyone else's interests. Anyone

found abusing their Freemasonry will be disciplined or kicked out. What Freemasons are taught is to care for the community as a whole, not just money, but time as well.

All a Freemason promises to do is to keep the *lawful* secrets of a fellow-member to which is added a very large exclusion clause which says, "murder, treason, felony and all offences contrary to the laws of God and the ordinances of the realm are at all times most especially excepted." A Freemason's duties to God, the law, his family and his duties as a citizen far outweigh and duties he may feel towards another Mason.

From a practical point of view, you are just too involved with the ceremonies in Lodge to have long private talks with anyone where secret deals could be arranged.

- *Why don't you publish lists of members?*

The answer is straightforward. First, because there will be a lot of people called say, Nick Smith, and if someone thinks that a Nick Smith is doing something wrong involving Freemasonry the wrong Nick Smith could be identified with disastrous results. Just imagine if the wrong Nick Smith gets lambasted in the local newspaper and his business folds as a result – and he might not even be a Freemason. Secondly, far from being a secret force furtively running things behind the scenes, Freemasonry, because of its liberal ideas of equality and freedom of religious belief, has been persecuted for centuries. Hitler made no secret of his hatred of Freemasons and sent as many as he could to the gas chambers. All totalitarian states have hated Freemasonry. France, Stalin, even Catherine the Great, suspected all manner of evil, and particularly hated the fact that they thought Freemasonry was unpatriotic and international. But it is only in one sense that Freemasonry can be considered international since it teaches that we are all human beings first and belong to our countries second, but at the same time saying that you must cheerfully comply with the laws of the land which prevents it from becoming any sort of pressure group. Freemasonry can never become that.

Thirdly, because belonging to Freemasonry is the same as belonging to any other type of recreational, non-political association, it is a private matter between the member and his Lodge and we therefore have no right to publish his name without his consent. Imagine if the RSPCA published a list of all its members without first asking them.

- *So if what you say is all true, what do you get up to behind closed doors. What is Freemasonry for then?*

What happens in a Lodge is very straightforward and follows a set procedure. There is a formalised procedure for opening the Lodge and for closing it which those taking part must learn off by heart.

If someone is to be made a Mason the Lodge members will learn a lot more from a script and try to make a dramatic impression on the candidate. Each of the ceremonies is in two parts – a slightly dramatic instruction on the principles and lessons taught in Freemasonry followed by a lecture or charge in which the candidate's various duties are spelled out.

If there are none of these ceremonies to do, the Lodge might invite someone to give a talk say on the history of Freemasonry or how the charities work. Rather like amateur dramatics, Freemasons enjoy coming together for a purpose not to do with their work or family life to co-operate in putting on the plays and, just like a play, it is very enjoyable purely for its own sake.

- *Aren't these rituals out of place in modern society?*

No. The ceremonies are shared experiences which are deeply felt. The use of drama, allegory and symbolism impresses the principles and teachings more firmly in the mind of the candidate than if they were simply passed on in matter-of-fact modern language.

- *How many of these ceremonies are there?*

Basic Freemasonry (or Craft Freemasonry) consists of three ceremonies completed by a fourth ceremony known as the Royal Arch.

There are, for those who wish to explore the subject in greater depth, other additional Masonic ceremonies, which are not in any way superior to or higher than the Craft. Membership of these is a great deal less than that of the Craft.

- *Why do you not allow women to join?*

When Freemasonry started, all associations were pretty much for men only. However, there is a flourishing womens' Freemasonry and I can put you in touch with them if you like. They too like to keep apart from men for pretty much the same reason as you don't get mixed football teams.

Men and women have plenty of places they can meet anyway and should have the right to socialise with each other sometimes."

- *Isn't it just for white people?*

Definitely not. Freemasonry has always been open to men from all ethnic backgrounds and, as far as we know since we don't keep a record of such things at the moment, the mix is pretty good. As it happens, a Masonic Lodge is a really good place to meet people from all different backgrounds and where what you do for a living or where you come from becomes irrelevant. When you are sitting in a lodge meeting with Afro-Caribbeans, Hindus, Sikhs, Caucasians and so on, all that really does become irrelevant.

- *Isn't it just for the middle-class?*

Definitely not. You get a real assortment of people – from dukes to dustmen. In lodges all over the country you get a mixture of builders, barons, doctors, taxi drivers, factory workers, self-employed – all meeting together, and whatever your background might be is irrelevant.

- *How many Freemasons are there?*

Under the United Grand Lodge of England – which covers England and Wales and a few Lodges overseas – there is about 360,000. In the whole of the world there may be as many as six million but it is hard to get an accurate figure.

- *Why are you against Roman Catholics?*

We're not at all and never have been. Roman Catholics have always been welcome in the United Grand Lodge of England – indeed several Grand Masters have been Catholics. However, several Papal Bulls many years ago once attacked Freemasonry on the grounds of anti-clericalism and political involvement, confusing a number of European political associations, which had adopted quasi-Masonic trappings, with regular Freemasonry. It is to be hoped that the Catholic Church will take a more lenient view of Catholics belonging to regular Freemasonry.

- *Isn't Freemasonry a rival to religion?*

Emphatically not. Although Freemasonry requires a belief in a Supreme Being and its principles are common to all great religions, it does not try

to replace religion or be a substitute for it. Everyone who becomes a Freemason is urged to practice his religion and to regard its holy book as the unerring standard of truth. Freemasonry does not tell its members what their beliefs should be nor does it offer any sacraments any more than, say, daily prayers at the House of Commons do. Freemasonry deals in relations between men, religion deals in a man's relationship with God.

Freemasons are taught to tolerate and understand others. History is full of lessons about the disastrous effects of intolerance. You only have to think of religious persecution, slavery, racial violence and the appalling events of Nazi Germany and so on – all through intolerance or misunderstanding. This tolerance extends to other peoples' religious views. Because religion is not allowed to be discussed at Masonic meetings, people from all sorts of backgrounds can meet happily together without such strife getting in the way.

- *Why do you call God the Great Architect?*

Because Freemasonry embraces all men who believe in a Supreme Being, it could upset our harmony if we referred solely to say, the God of the Christians. Using such terms as the Great Architect enables men of different religions to pray together without offence being given to any of them, stressing Freemasonry's teaching of religious tolerance. The expression Great Architect is not some specific Masonic God or an attempt to fuse all gods into one.

- *Don't you feel silly rolling up your trouser legs?*

Funnily enough you don't. Anything out of context can always be made to seem strange. It is done as a stylised way of entering Freemasonry penniles, and in rags (in the last century he did actually change into a suit of rags, symbolised by rolling up one sleeve and one trouser leg. Taken out of context it might appear humiliating or silly but it has a purpose because it does not matter who you are – prince or dustman, millionaire or pauper – everyone goes through the same ritual.

Contrary to what some people think, Freemasons do not all roll up their trouser legs at every meeting.

- *So can anyone join?*

Of course.

- *But don't you have to have a lot of money? What about if I were on the dole?*

No, as I said we have people from all sorts of backgrounds and that includes financial. But like every other membership organisation there are subscription fees. So just as you might not feel able to afford to go to a local snooker club if you are on state benefit you might not feel you can afford Freemasonry.

The actual costs vary from Lodge to Lodge but anyone wishing to join can find a Lodge to suit their pocket. You can join as many Lodges as your time and pocket will allow, but without it affecting your family life and responsibilities.

- *Don't you just look after each other?*
(Explain non-Masonic charitable donations from the Grand Charity etc).

- *If it's in fact all open and above board, why can't I attend?*
For the same reason you can't breeze into the administrative meetings of any club or association. With Freemasonry you have to be a Freemason.

- *How do I do that?*
Let me say again that anyone can join. But, because Freemasonry is organised into Lodges, they act like clubs and you have the usual rules about proposing and seconding. If you don't know anyone who is a Freemason to ask, come to Freemasons' Hall and we will tell you more and see what we can do. But let me say that we have never been able to accept people who have criminal records.

- *What is the Royal involvement these days?*
HRH the Duke of Kent has been Grand Master since 1967. HRH Prince Michael of Kent is the Provincial Grand Master for Middlesex and Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons.

HRH the Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh is a Master Mason, but has not attended for many years.

- *Why does the Prince of Wales not like Freemasonry?
Why did he not join?*

Like anyone else, Royal Princes have to ask to join Freemasonry, they are

not invited. He has not yet asked. Despite press reports to the contrary, the Prince of Wales has never made any comment or public statement about Freemasonry.

● *What about corruption in local government?*

There has been a lot of media coverage about Freemasonry and local authorities lately, where some people have claimed that Freemasonry is a secret society blighting local government. These people have demanded that registers be set up of either councillors or employees who are Freemasons and sometimes both.

We feel this is unnecessary since Freemasonry is not a secret society (Freemasons can tell who they like that they belong) and if anything would make councillors and council employees more conscientious of their public duties. We also think it is discrimination against us and are reluctant to agree to such measures when registers are available to councillors and others who are known to be antipathetic to us.

Given that many councillors are convinced that Freemasonry has a bad effect on local government, it is worth noting that of the 34 or so times when the Local Government Ombudsman has investigated so-called Masonic corruption in local authorities, only one was at all adverse and that only very mildly. The member concerned however, was suspended by his Provincial Grand Master for six months nevertheless. The others cleared us completely.

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