

“CAN A CATHOLIC BE A FREEMASON?”\*

By

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*During the last two days, I have received text messages and phone calls from a lot of people as a result of an interview allegedly given by Most Rev. Peter Kwasi Sarpong, Emeritus Archbishop of Kumasi, on the subject of Freemasonry and former President John Agyekum Kufuor’s membership of it. Many Catholics are confused about the Church’s teaching on Freemasonry as a result of this interview. Even if the person interviewed was not Archbishop Sarpong, I think it is necessary for me to address the substance of what was said in the interview and to show that the Church’s position on Freemasonry has not changed. This teaching is that one cannot be a Catholic and at the same time be a Freemason. I believe that the talk below, which I gave at the Christ the King Church some four years ago, throws light on Freemasonry and answers the questions raised in the interview. I have highlighted the most recent teaching on Freemasonry (The Declaration on Masonic Associations) in yellow since in the interview it is alleged that the Declaration lacks papal authority, as it came from a Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, who was Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger at that time. It should, however, be noted that the Declaration on Masonic Associations had the approval of Pope John Paul II and that, as stated in it, “local ecclesiastical authorities” (i.e., bishops and archbishops) do not have the right to teach anything to the contrary. I apologize for the length of the article on Freemasonry, but it is important to have a detailed account of it.*  
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*Introduction*

Many people regard Freemasonry as a benevolent and charitable organization, somehow similar to the Rotary and Lions Clubs, the Knights of Marshall, the Knights of St. John International or the Knights of Columbus. Undoubtedly, it is for this reason that some Catholics join this fraternity. Nevertheless, Catholics are forbidden to become Freemasons. The Catholic Church has opposed the Lodge nearly since the birth of modern Freemasonry in 1717. The Lodge has been condemned explicitly by eleven popes. What is Freemasonry and why is it condemned by the Catholic Church?

*The History of Freemasonry*

According to most historians of Freemasonry, the origins of Freemasonry can be traced to the stonemasons who built the magnificent cathedrals and castles of medieval Europe. These masons became known as “free masons” because, unlike the local guild masons,

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they were not indentured workers, i.e. they did not have to work under an unbreakable contract for a fixed period, in return for room and board, training, or pay.

These “free masons” organized themselves into closely-knit groups to protect their identity and working practices. The masons’ guilds were at first limited to stonemasons, but after the Reformation had virtually put an end to the construction of new church buildings, the Masonic lodges, whose numbers were diminishing, began to admit to their ranks “honorary” or non-working members who had no idea of how to wield a trowel or a chisel. Among these were philosophers, merchants and bankers. These were known as “accepted” masons.

In due course, the honorary members outnumbered the operative masons (those who built physical structures) and adopted the symbols and secret signs of the lodges to form what became known as “speculative” Masonry whose members build the “spiritual temple” (a Masonic expression for the soul).<sup>1</sup> Today, Freemasonry is entirely speculative, although its operative background has left its mark in the ritual use of such tools as the square, level, plumb, compass and trowel. These symbols of masonry now serve as guides for living a good moral life.<sup>2</sup> The guilds have thus become societies dedicated to general ideals, such as fraternity, equality and peace, and their meetings are more social than business occasions.

Modern Freemasonry was born in London on 24 June 1717 in the Apple Tree Tavern, during the period of the Enlightenment. On that day, four or more guilds, called lodges, came together in London to form a grand lodge for London and Westminster, which, within six years, became the Grand Lodge of England. This Grand Lodge, known as the “Modern Grand Lodge”, developed the blueprint for rituals and ceremonies that Masons use today. This body is the “mother” grand lodge of Freemasons in the world and has given birth to all recognized grand lodges.

Some Masonic non-conformists, who claimed that the rituals of the Modern Grand Lodge de-christianized Freemasonry, established the rival Ancient Grand Lodge. The two Grand Lodges existed side by side as rivals from 1751 to 1813, when they merged to form the United Grand Lodge of Ancient Freemasons of England. Today, all regular lodges in the world trace their origins to the Grand Lodge of England.

### *Freemasonry in America*

Freemasonry was brought to American shores from England not too long after the establishment of the first Grand Lodge. The earliest of the U.S. lodges, founded by authority of the Grand Lodge of England, were the First Lodge of Boston, established in 1733, and one in Philadelphia, established about the same time. By the time of the American Revolution, about 150 lodges existed in colonial America.

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<sup>1</sup> John Salza, *Freemasonry Unmasked – An Insider Reveals the Secrets of the Lodge* (Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, Huntington, Indiana, 2006), p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Ashley Beck, *Freemasonry and the Christian Faith* (Catholic Truth Society: London, 2005), p. 6.

## *Freemasonry in Ghana*

Freemasonry was introduced in Ghana, then Gold Coast, through Lodges under the English Constitution as far back as 1859. The practice of Freemasonry has been in continuous existence in Ghana since 1859. Today, altogether 49 subordinate Lodges constitute the Foundation Lodges of the Grand Lodge of Ghana and are found in such places as Accra, Kumasi, Cape Coast, Sekondi, Takoradi and Tarkwa. The Lodges have been grouped into three Provincial Grand Lodges, namely, (1) Provincial Grand Lodge, South East based in Accra with 20 Lodges. (2) Provincial Grand Lodge, South West based in Cape Coast with 17 Lodges and (3) Provincial Grand Lodge, North based in Kumasi with 12 Lodges.

Some very prominent Ghanaians are known to be members of Masonic Associations. Some Christians, indeed some Catholics, are also known to be Freemasons.

## *Influences on Freemasonry*

Freemasonry takes much from the world's three great religions. It takes many of its practices from Christianity. The Bible is usually placed on the altar, and passages from the New Testament are woven into the rituals (though the word "Christ" is always omitted from the texts).

Freemasonry also draws extensively from Judaism. The setting for the three Masonic degrees is "King Solomon's Temple". Masonry also borrows from Islam, especially in the rituals of the Shriners, a secret fraternal non-Masonic organization whose members are Knights Templars and 32nd-degree Masons. The Shriner's oath is taken on the Koran and sworn to Allah.

In addition to the world's three major religions, Freemasonry also borrows from Deism, a rationalist religious philosophy that flourished in the 17th and 18th centuries, particularly in England. Deism sought to liberate people's minds from the "oppression" of dogma and ecclesiastical authority in favour of discerning truth through the rational study of nature.

Deism maintained that there was no room for divine revelation. The Masonic rituals developed by the Grand Lodge of England reflect the influence of Enlightenment philosophy, the bedrock of Deism. Freemasonry's degrees did away with Christian prayer and any references to Catholicism. A Mason was now required to believe only in the deistic "Great (or Grand) Architect of the Universe" and an afterlife. This belief makes it possible for Jews, Deists and Muslims to become members, but supposedly barred atheists and polytheists.

Apart from Christianity, Judaism and Islam, Freemasonry draws from Gnosticism<sup>3</sup> in its search for esoteric spiritual knowledge that is not available to the uninitiated.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Gnosticism was a pre-Christian and early Christian religious movement teaching that salvation comes by learning esoteric spiritual truths that free humanity from the material world, believed in this movement to be evil.

<sup>4</sup> Salza, *Masonry Unmasked*, pp. 52-54.

## *Freemasonry and the Catholic Church*<sup>5</sup>

The Catholic Church has opposed the Lodge nearly since the birth of modern Freemasonry in 1717. Since the founding of the Grand Lodge of England, eleven popes have explicitly condemned Freemasonry or Masonic principles. These popes are: Pope Clement XII (28 April 1738); Pope Benedict XIV (18 May, 1751); Pius VII (13 September 1821); Pope Leo XII (13 March 1825); Pope Pius VIII (24 May 1829); Pope Gregory XVI (15 August 1832); Pius IX (between 1846 and 1873); Leo XIII (15 February 1882; 20 April 1884; 1887; 15 October 1890; 18 December 1892; 20 June 1894); Pope Pius IX (1907); Pope Pius X (1907); Pope Pius XI (1924).

The most recent condemnation of Freemasonry is contained in the “*Declaration on Masonic Associations*”<sup>6</sup> issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on 26 November 1983. This document, which was written by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (the future Pope Benedict XVI) and approved by Pope John Paul II, declared that Masonic principles are irreconcilable with the doctrine of Church, and that Catholic membership in Freemasonry remains forbidden. The full text is as follows:

### CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH

#### DECLARATION ON MASONIC ASSOCIATIONS

*It has been asked whether there has been any change in the Church’s decision in regard to Masonic associations since the new Code of Canon Law does not mention them expressly, unlike the previous Code.*

*This Sacred Congregation is in a position to reply that this circumstance is due to an editorial criterion, which was followed also in the case of other associations likewise unmentioned inasmuch as they are contained in wider categories. Therefore, the Church’s negative judgment in regard to Masonic association remains unchanged since their principles have always been considered irreconcilable with the doctrine of the Church and therefore membership in them remains forbidden. The faithful who enrol in Masonic associations are in a state of grave sin and may not receive Holy Communion.*

*It is not within the competence of local ecclesiastical authorities to give a judgment on the nature of Masonic associations which would imply a derogation from what has been decided above, and this in line with the Declaration of this Sacred Congregation issued on*

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<sup>5</sup>The Catholic Church is not the only church to oppose the Lodge. Other groups hostile to lodge membership include many branches of Lutheranism, the Christian Reformed Church, most Pentecostals, the Church of the Nazarene, the Seventhday Adventists, the Holiness churches, the Quakers, the United Brethren in Christ, the Mennonites, the Free Methodists, the Church of the Brethren, the Assemblies of God, the Wesleyans, the Regular Baptists, the Salvation Army and significant minorities in such mainline churches as the Episcopal. Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints [Mormons] also oppose Masonry [cf. William J. Whalen, “The Pastoral Problem of Masonic Membership”, *Origins*, 15/6 (June 27, 1985), 90].

<sup>6</sup> Its Latin title is *Declaratio de associationibus massonicis*.

17 February 1981 (cf. AAS 73 1981 pp. 240-241; English language edition of *L'Osservatore Romano*, 9 March 1981).

*In an audience granted to the undersigned Cardinal Prefect, the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II, approved and ordered the publication of this Declaration, which had been decided in an ordinary meeting of this Sacred Congregation.*

Rome, from the Office of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 26 November 1983.

Joseph Card. RATZINGER

Prefect

+ Fr. Jerome Hamer, O.P.

Titular Archbishop of Lorium, Secretary

The Church's position is that Freemasonry is a religion in its own right with its own doctrines, which are not compatible with Christian beliefs. For this reason one cannot simultaneously be a Christian and be a Freemason. The Church's position will become clear from the following considerations:

*(1) Freemasonry as a Religion*

Freemasonry sees itself as a religion. According to one of Freemasonry's most outstanding authorities, Albert G. Mackey,<sup>7</sup>

Although Freemasonry is not a dogmatic theology, and is tolerant in the admission of men of every religious faith, it would be wrong to suppose that it is without a creed. On the contrary, it has a creed, the assent to which it rigidly enforces, and the denial of which is absolutely incompatible with membership in the Order. This creed consists of two articles: First, a belief in God, the Creator of all things, who is therefore recognized as the Grand Architect of the Universe; and secondly, a belief in the eternal life, to which this present life is but a preparatory and probationary state.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Albert G. Mackey (1807-1881) is one of the three foremost authorities of Freemasonry in the United States. Mackey gave Freemasonry a library of basic books, including his *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*, *The Symbolism of Freemasonry*, *Mackey's Masonic Ritualist*, *Lexicon of Freemasonry* and *Text Book of Masonic Jurisprudence*. The other two authorities are Albert Pike and Henry Wilson Coil. Pike (1801-1891) remodelled the entire structure of the Scottish Rite and served as Sovereign Grand Commander of the Southern Jurisdiction from 1859 until his death. Coil (1885-1974) edited the massive *Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia*, which was published in 1961. No other American Masons have had more influence and prestige than this trio (cf. Whalen, *Christianity and American Freemasonry*, p.8).

<sup>8</sup> Mackey, *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*, p. 731.

Freemasonry goes beyond promoting the common good and moves into the realm of religion and soteriology. It claims that the practice of its principles will help a Mason to advance in his spirituality and get to heaven: “By the practice of Freemasonry, its members may advance their spirituality, and mount by the theological ladder from the Lodge on earth to the Lodge in heaven”.<sup>9</sup>

The Lodge even claims that it is a “divinely appointed institution”,<sup>10</sup> and that “no institution was ever raised on a better principle, or more solid foundation”.<sup>11</sup> Freemasonry sees itself as a completely self-sufficient system of religious and moral teaching whose members need nothing else to be spiritually edified, either in this life or the life to come: “These three degrees (1st, 2nd, 3rd) thus form a perfect and harmonious whole, nor can it be conceived that anything can be suggested more, which the soul of man requires”.<sup>12</sup>

Although some Freemasons claim that Freemasonry is “neither a religion nor a substitute for religion”,<sup>13</sup> this claim is not supported by the evidence provided by the Craft. Masonic writers, such as Pike<sup>14</sup> and Mackey,<sup>15</sup> have acknowledged that Freemasonry has all the attributes of a religion: temples, altars, prayers, a moral code, worship, vestments, feast days, the promise of reward or punishment in an after-life (“the Grand Lodge above”) and a hierarchy.

Mackey has no doubt in his mind that Freemasonry is a religion:

Look at its ancient landmarks, its sublime ceremonies, its profound symbols and allegories – all inculcating religious observance, and teaching religious truth, and who can deny that it is eminently a religious institution? ... Masonry, then, is indeed a religious institution; and on this ground mainly, if not alone, should the religious Mason defend it.<sup>16</sup>

Coil expresses a similar sentiment about Freemasonry:

Does Freemasonry continually teach and insist upon a creed, tenet, and dogma? Does it have meetings characterized by the practice of rites and ceremonies in and by which its creed, tenet, and dogma are illustrated by myths, symbols, and allegories? If Freemasonry were not a religion, what would have to be done to make it such? Nothing would be necessary or at least nothing but to add more of the same.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Heirloom Masonic Bible* (Master Reference Edition, Wichita, Kan.: DeVore & Sons, 1988), p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, *Quarterly Bulletin of the Iowa Masonic Library* (1917), 54.

<sup>11</sup> *Wisconsin Multiple Letter Cipher*, 59.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Sickles, “Ahimon Rezon” or “Freemason’s Guide”, Columbia, S.C.: R.L. Bryan Company, 1965, p. 196.

<sup>13</sup> *Current Direction on Membership*, Masonic Year Book 2000-1

<sup>14</sup> Pike, *Morals and Dogma of the Antient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry*, Charleston, S.C.: Supreme Council of the Thirty-third Degree for the Southern Jurisdiction of the United States, 1881.

<sup>15</sup> Mackey, *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*.

<sup>16</sup> Mackey, *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*, p. 619.

<sup>17</sup> Coil, *Coil’s Masonic Encyclopedia* (New York: Macoy, 1961), p. 512.

Not only does Freemasonry see itself as a religion, but it sees itself as *the universal* religion, while it considers Christianity as simply another of the many sects whose particular opinions have divided humankind over the ages. In the words of Pike, "...Masonry teaches, and has preserved in their purity, the cardinal tenets of the old primitive faith, which underlie and are the foundation of all religions. All that ever existed have had a basis of truth; all have overlaid the truth with error".<sup>18</sup> It is the belief of Freemasons that Masonry strips sectarian religion of these encrusted "errors" and reveals itself as the universal religion. While religion is guilty of being overlaid with superstition and error, Masonry remains pure and undefiled.

Freemasonry holds the view that religions are all concurrently seeking the truth of the Absolute. It teaches that all religions are competitive attempts to express the truth about God and are equally effective in advancing one's spiritual life. This is known as *indifferentism*. Proponents of indifferentism maintain that God looks only at the sincerity of the person's intentions, and is not concerned about his or her particular doctrinal beliefs. Indifferentism is based on the idea that, beyond the fact of God's existence, we can know virtually nothing about God. This is because God, being infinite, is incomprehensible to our finite minds. Masonry reasons that there is no need to argue over any particular conception of God, who will be pleased with whatever form of worship we sincerely offer him.

Freemasonry also holds all religions to be equal. This idea of the equality of religions is based on the supposed equality of their founders. Jesus is thus viewed by the Lodge as no more than a "particular, finite, historical figure, who reveals the divine not in an exclusive way, but in a way complementary with other revelatory and salvific figures".<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the claim made by Christians that the Christian religion is the true religion would be unacceptable in Freemasonry.

## (2) *The Masonic Notion of God*

The first article of Masonic belief is a belief in God, the Creator of all things, who is therefore recognized as the Grand Architect of the Universe. God is referred to in Masonic literature, rituals and prayers as "Great Architect of The Universe", traditionally abbreviated in Masonic rituals to GAOTU, or (in the "Second degree") the "Grand Geometrician", or "The Most High".

The origin of the name GAOTU is Freemasonry's rationalistic belief that God definitively reveals himself only through the geometrical perfection of the universe. For the masons, geometry produces the nearest possible "proof" of God's existence. The Mason is taught to believe that he can discover the power, the wisdom, and the goodness of the Grand Architect of the Universe, and view with delight the proportions which

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<sup>18</sup> Pike, *Morals and Dogma*, p. 224.

<sup>19</sup> Pike, *Morals and Dogma*, p. 525.

connect this vast machine. Geometry is thus considered the basis on which the superstructure of Freemasonry is erected.

Because geometry is Masonry's best evidence of God's existence, God is symbolized in American and other English-speaking lodges by the capital letter G standing, by Masonic tradition, for God, Geometry, and Gnosis. The letter G is typically suspended above the chair of the Worshipful Master, who presides in the eastern section of the lodge. This symbol, particular to no single system of belief, promotes Freemasonry's syncretistic understanding of deity. In fact, the Masonic Bible says that the letter G represents "the great God of all Freemasons". Another of the Lodge's syncretistic symbols for God is the All-Seeing Eye. The meaning of the symbol has clear connections to Enlightenment Deism mentioned above. The All-Seeing Eye is displayed on many Masonic aprons, especially on those worn by former Worshipful Masters.

Freemasonry's use of GAOTU, the letter G, and the All-Seeing Eye goes beyond promoting a deistic understanding of God, even to embracing a polytheistic understanding of deity. This is needed because in the United States and most other countries, Freemasonry does not require its members to be monotheists. Being dogmatic about some particular conception of God would be considered un-Masonic because doing so would hinder Freemasonry's ability to bring together men of every creed and nation. Grand Lodges require only that members "believe in deity".

Some strands of Freemasonry do not subscribe to monotheism. According to Coil, monotheism "violates Masonic principles, for it requires belief in a specific kind of Supreme Deity".<sup>20</sup> Coil refers to the monotheistic God of Scripture as "a partisan, tribal God" and suggests that such a concept of God is inferior to the Lodge's, in which God is "a boundless, eternal, universal, undenominational, and international Divine Spirit, so vastly removed from the speck called man, that He cannot be known, named, or approached".<sup>21</sup>

In spite of the opinions of these prominent Masonic authorities, some Christian Masons insist that the "oneness" of the GAOTU requires monotheism and rejects polytheism. The following statement from a Masonic source supports this position: "Monotheism is the sole dogma of Freemasonry. Belief in one God is required of every initiate, but his conception of the Supreme Being is left to his own interpretation. Freemasonry is not concerned with theological distinctions".<sup>22</sup> However, such a view is not reconcilable with the fact that no Grand Lodge limits its membership to religious groups that subscribe to monotheism, i.e., Jews, Muslims, and Christians. All men who believe in a supreme being are welcome to join Freemasonry, including Hindus, Buddhists, and Shintoists. The Masons' deistic notion of God excludes any personal knowledge of the deity as well as the possibility of God's self-revelation to mankind.

The Lodge considers any specific doctrines concerning God, beyond what can be known by nature and reason, to be "sectarian" innovations. According to Mackey, "the

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<sup>20</sup> Coil, *Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia*, pp. 516-17.

<sup>21</sup> Coil, *Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia*, pp. 516-17.

<sup>22</sup> *Indiana Monitor* (1975), p. 41.

religion of freemasonry is not sectarian. It admits men of every creed within its hospitable bosom, rejecting none and approving none for his particular faith. It is not Judaism ... it is not Christianity”.<sup>23</sup> Unencumbered by sectarian complexities, all people can unite and offer worship around the altar of Freemasonry: “Around it, all men, whether they have received their teachings from Confucius, Zoroaster, Moses, Mohammed or the founder of the Christian religion – just so long as they believe in the universality of the fatherhood of God and universality of the brotherhood of man – meet upon a common level”.<sup>24</sup>

In criticism of this notion of God, the following can be said. This being is something neutral, not defined, and open to every interpretation. Every person can insert here his own concept of God: the Christian like the Muslim, the Confucian like the animist or the member of any religion. However, the Christian God is not an umbrella deity under which all faiths can be found. He is unique and exclusive. He is One; he is also Triune. Supreme ruler of the universe, he is also Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. While he is Creator, he is also Redeemer and Sanctifier. While he can be known from the order of creation, he has also revealed himself *in the Person of Jesus Christ*. Approaching God in prayer as merely the “Great Architect of the Universe”, as Masons do, also fosters a very impersonal view of God and robs him of his divine essence. “Designing the universe” is one of the things that God has done, *but it is not who God is*. Knowing “*who God is*” is essential to developing a personal relationship with him. God is a *Father*, first and foremost, and that is because he has a *Son*, Jesus Christ, whom he eternally begets in the Holy Spirit.

### (3) *The Masonic View of Christ*

The position of Christ is seen as a source of dissension and division in the Lodge, and that is why discussion of religion (and politics) is forbidden in lodges. Freemasonry holds the view of Christ as truth for only some people at a particular time:

Though Avatars<sup>25</sup> have come to all people at different times with the same essential message, nevertheless the Christian Avatar is still not acceptable to some peoples .... Jesus of Nazareth was sent to be a light to the world to some branches of the human race, but other branches have had, and do now have, their Buddha, their Krishna, their Zoroaster, their Confucius, their Mohammed.<sup>26</sup>

According to Pike,

Catholicism was a vital truth in its earliest ages, but it became obsolete, and

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<sup>23</sup> Mackey, *An Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*, p. 243.

<sup>24</sup> *Louisiana Monitor* (1980), p. 133.

<sup>25</sup> Avatar (Sanskrit *avatara*, “descent”), in Hinduism, descent of a god into the world of human beings for the duration of a human life span.

<sup>26</sup> Lynn F. Perkins, *The Meaning of Masonry: A Popular Guide to the Values of Ancient and Modern Freemasonry* (Lakemont, Ga.: CSA Press, 1960), pp. 54-55.

Protestantism arose, flourished and deteriorated. The doctrines of Zoroaster were the best which the ancient Persians were fitted to receive; those of Confucius were fitted for the Chinese; those of Mohammed for the idolatrous Arabs of his age. Each was Truth for the time.<sup>27</sup>

Christian Masons are asked to place Christ alongside – not above – other gods. Indeed, the lodge honours Jesus Christ as it honours Socrates, Buddha, and Mohammed. It does not acknowledge any special spiritual claims by Jesus, since this would violate the basis of Freemasonry. At no time is the Christian Mason encouraged to pattern his life after Christ or to cultivate the specifically Christian virtues.

Prayers in Masonic lodges are always directed to the Great Architect of the Universe (and other similar titles). The name of Jesus Christ is deliberately omitted from these prayers. Christian Masons thus argue that they can worship God outside of the church in a manner that would not be allowed inside the church.

According to Masonic teaching, fidelity to Masonic principles will enable the Mason to enter the “lodge on high”. The Mason wins salvation, not through the passion and death of Jesus Christ, but through the mythical assassination and resurrection of Hiram Abiff.

#### *(4) Emphasis on Effort*

The whole system of progress from one degree to another is heavy with emphasis on the Mason passing through stages as a result of his own efforts: God’s grace does not come into it. This makes Freemasonry rather like Pelagianism, the 5th century heresy which taught that humanity could achieve perfection through good works; it is also a form of the earlier second century heresy of Gnosticism, in which people were taught that they could attain salvation through acquiring secret knowledge, *gnosis*.

The Entered Apprentice Mason is called a “Rough Ashlar”, meaning a stone taken from the quarry in its rude, natural state. Without any discussion of the stain of original sin or the need for baptism, the Lodge teaches its members that they can, by their own works, become Perfect Ashlars. A Perfect Ashlar symbolizes a state of perfection before God. It is the Mason’s good conduct, independent of God’s gifts of grace and mercy, that is to make him fit for the “house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens”.<sup>28</sup>

#### *(5) Freemasonry and Morality*

The Lodge’s notion of morality is relativistic. Allen E. Roberts argues in favour of a relativistic and subjective morality: “What is moral to one man may be immoral to another. Each man must decide for himself what the word encompasses, taking into account the moral standards of the society in which he lives ... He must set his own standards, his own

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<sup>27</sup> Pike, *Morals and Dogma*, p. 38.

<sup>28</sup> Texas, *Monitor of the Lodge*, p. 19; see also *Masonic Bible*, p. 35.

principles”.<sup>29</sup>

Since American and European Masonic lodges are predominantly Christian and Jewish, one would suppose that the Craft would, at a minimum, make reference to the Ten Commandments in its moral teachings. Nonetheless, Masonic ritual makes no reference to them. The reason is that they are part of God’s revelation. Therefore, while most Masons would presumably agree on the grave obligations set forth in the Decalogue, Freemasonry’s system of morality must exclude them from its non-sectarian theology.

A Mason is also required to swear to God that he “will not have illicit carnal intercourse with a Master Mason’s wife, mother, sister or daughter”.<sup>30</sup> A man who commits such an act violates his Masonic oath and risks expulsion. But there is no such sanction for carnal intercourse with non-Masonically affiliated women. While such an act of fornication or adultery would be equally sinful, Freemasonry seems to suggest that one offence is graver than the other, and that is gravely offensive from a Christian perspective.

The Mason is also required to swear that he will “keep the secrets of a brother Master Mason inviolate, when communicated to and received by [him] as such, murder and treason excluded”.<sup>31</sup> Edmond Ronayne’s *Handbook of Freemasonry*, for example, instructs Masons: “You must conceal all crimes of your brother Masons ... and should you be summoned as a witness against a brother Mason be always sure to shield him .... It may be perjury to do this, it is true, but you’re keeping your obligations”.<sup>32</sup> Thus, Masonry’s system of morality condones bearing false witness against another, which is a violation of the moral law.

#### (6) *Indifference towards the Bible*

Freemasonry also exhibits its indifference towards divine revelation as found in the Bible. Because Freemasonry views other religious writings as equally legitimate expressions of God’s will, it offers them an equal place on the altar with the Bible. Just as Freemasonry views all gods as equal to Christ, the Lodge views all religious writings as equal to the Bible. The Masonic Service Association tells us: “Whether it be the Gospels of the Christian, the Book of Law of the Hebrew, the Koran of the Mussulman, or the Vedas of the Hindu, it everywhere Masonically conveys the same idea – symbolizing the will of God revealed to man”.<sup>33</sup> To Freemasonry, it does not matter that the Bible affirms the divinity of Christ while the Koran denies his divinity. For the Lodge, both views, however contradictory, are said to express the “will of God”.

Coil says that Masonry does not believe that the Bible’s contents are “Divine Law, inspired, or revealed”,<sup>34</sup> and adds that “no responsible authority has held that a Freemason must

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<sup>29</sup> Allen E. Roberts, *The Craft and Its Symbols: Opening the Door to Masonic Symbolism* (Richmond, Va.: Macoy, 1969), p. 43.

<sup>30</sup> *Wisconsin Multiple Letter Cipher*, 113.

<sup>31</sup> *Wisconsin Multiple Letter Cipher*, 113.

<sup>32</sup> Edmond Ronayne, *Ronayne’s Handbook of Freemasonry* (Chicago: Edmond Ronayne, 1917; reprint, Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger Publishing, 1998), p. 183.

<sup>33</sup> *The Short Talk Bulletin*, “The Holy Bible,” Vol. 2, No.3 (1924).

<sup>34</sup> *Coil’s Masonic Encyclopedia*, p. 520.

believe the Bible or any part of it”.<sup>35</sup> According to Mackey, “the Bible is used among Masons as a symbol of the will of God, however it may be expressed. And, therefore, whatever to any people expresses that will may be used as a substitute for the Bible in a Masonic Lodge”.<sup>36</sup>

### *(7) Masonic Eschatology*

In the area of eschatology, or what happens after the death of the human person, while both the Lodge and the Church teach that our bodies will be raised incorruptible and glorified to everlasting life, the Church teaches that this will be accomplished through the power of Jesus’ resurrection. However, in Freemasonry, this faith is not based on a belief in Jesus Christ. By omitting Jesus Christ from its teachings on the resurrection, the Lodge demonstrates that Christ is not essential to its doctrine. One does not have to believe in Jesus to be a Mason.

Moreover, Freemasonry teaches the doctrine of the soul physically sleeping for an unknown period of time. This is not a Catholic belief. “Soul sleep” is a doctrine held by other religious groups, such as Seventh-day Adventists. Unlike the Lodge, the Catholic Church does not teach that the soul goes into hibernation after death. Instead, the soul is subject to judgment after death, with immediate reward or punishment.

### *(8) Masonic Oaths*

Another major reason for the church’s hostility to Freemasonry is the Masonic oath or rather the series of oaths required of initiates. At each degree, a candidate has to swear not to reveal to outsiders the details of the rituals, passwords or other things which are revealed during the rituals. Oaths are sworn on what is called the “Volume of Sacred Law” (V.S.L.) which is usually (in England and in the U.S.) the Bible, but which can be the Jewish Bible or the Koran. The Entered Apprentice oath pertains mainly to secrecy, while the second and third involve obligations towards the brethren in the lodge. The candidate freely consents to the most horrible mutilations and punishments should he ever reveal any of the secrets of the lodge. By the time he has become a full-fledged Master Mason, he has agreed to have his throat cut, his tongue torn out by the roots, his body buried in the sands of the sea, his breast torn open, his heart plucked out and devoured by vultures, his body sliced in two, his bowels removed and burned to ashes, and the ashes scattered to the four winds should he ever violate so much as one iota of his obligation.

The use of solemn oaths taken on the Bible in order to join a fraternal society or advance to its higher degrees has never been permitted by the Church. Objectively speaking, those who swear such oaths are guilty of either vain or rash swearing. This

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<sup>35</sup> *Coil’s Masonic Encyclopedia*, p. 520.

<sup>36</sup> Mackey, *An Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*, p. 114.

is especially the case when the oaths are given for what turns out to be the supposed secrecy of a few passwords and handshakes.

Walton Hannah poses the basic dilemma of the Masonic oaths when he says, “Either the oaths mean what they say or they do not. If they do mean what they say, then the candidate is entering into a pact consenting to his own murder by barbarous torture and mutilation should he break it. If they do not mean what they say, then he is swearing high-sounding schoolboy nonsense on the Bible, which verges on blasphemy”.<sup>37</sup>

### *(9) The Masonic Notion of Rebirth and Enlightenment*

The notion of rebirth and enlightenment also causes problems for the Christian. During the initiation ceremony for the first degree, the candidate is asked to strip down to his underwear. He is then given a special Masonic garment and slippers. He is also required to remove all jewelry, including wedding ring, crucifix, scapular and other sacramentals so that he might carry “nothing offensive or defensive into the lodge”.<sup>38</sup> He is then blindfolded and a noose is placed around his neck, which the Lodge calls “cabletow”. “Symbolically the cabletow is the cord by which the Masonic infant is attached to his Mother Lodge”.<sup>39</sup>

As a result of this blindfolding the candidate is in darkness. Freemasonry is clear that this darkness relates, not just to his ignorance of a few fraternity passwords, but to his customary spiritual condition. This darkness is “preparatory and preliminary to his receiving the light he desires and searches”.<sup>40</sup> The Mason’s rebirth is symbolically achieved by his initiation into the Lodge. Mackey elaborates on the spiritual, moral and intellectual condition of the candidate as he waits outside the lodge room:

There he stands without our portals, on the threshold of this new Masonic life, in darkness, helplessness, and ignorance. Having been wandering amid the errors and covered over with the pollutions of the outer and profane world, he comes inquiringly to our doors, seeking the new birth, and asking a withdrawal of the veil which conceals divine truth from his uninitiated sight ....– the portals of the Temple have been thrown widely open, and Masonry stands before the neophyte in all the glory of its form and beauty, to be fully revealed to him, however, only when the new birth has been completely accomplished.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Walton Hannah, *Darkness Visible* (London: Augustine Press, 1952), p. 21.

<sup>38</sup> *Wisconsin Multiple Letter Cipher*, 34.

<sup>39</sup> Carl H. Claudy, *Introduction to Freemasonry*, Vol. 1, Entered Apprentice, 40.

<sup>40</sup> *Masonic Bible*, p. 39.

<sup>41</sup> Mackey, *Masonic Ritualist* (New York: Clark and Maynard), 1869, 23.

By virtue of his enlightenment, the new Mason is called a “son of light” by the Masonic Bible.<sup>42</sup> The newly initiated Mason is made to feel that he possesses knowledge of light and truth that the uninitiated do not possess. All men alike come to the portals of the Masonic temple as aimless wanderers ignorant of divine truths.

Freemasonry makes no references to that baptism which makes the Christian a participant in God’s own life, to the sacraments of the Church, to the revealed truths of the Gospel. The person being initiated must confess that he has long been in darkness, and now seeks to be brought to light. He may have accepted baptism, but to the brothers of the lodge he remains in “darkness”. The Lodge thus views the Christian, who has been reborn into the death and resurrection of Christ, as being in a spiritually deficient condition. He must die to his former self in Christ and be reborn into the new life of the Lodge. Indeed, the rituals of the first three Masonic degrees exhibit a clear sacramental character, indicating that a significant transformation is undergone by those who participate in them. This is unacceptable from a Christian perspective.

Freemasonry’s doctrine on the resurrection and the immortality of the soul lacks any specific catechesis of the eternal reality of judgment and hell. According to Lynn F. Perkins,

Masonry teaches that redemption and salvation are both the power and the responsibility of the individual Mason. Saviours like Hiram Abiff can and do show the way, but men must always follow and demonstrate, each for himself, his power to save himself, to build his own spiritual fabric in his own time and way. Every man in essence is his own saviour and redeemer; for if he does not save himself, he will not be saved.<sup>43</sup>

### *Conclusion*

It is clear from the foregoing that Freemasonry is a religion in its own right, with doctrines that are irreconcilable with Christian doctrines. What it teaches about the following cannot be reconciled with Christian beliefs, i.e., God, Christ, the denial of the role of grace and Christ in salvation, morality, its attitude towards the Bible, eschatology, the masonic oaths and the notion of rebirth and enlightenment. For this reason, one cannot simultaneously be a Catholic and a Freemason, just as one cannot be a Catholic and be Muslim, a Hindu, a Shintoist or a practitioner of African Traditional Religion. One will have to make a choice between Catholicism and Freemasonry.

Let me conclude by drawing attention to the DECLARATION OF THE GHANA CATHOLIC BISHOPS’ CONFERENCE ON SANCTIONS FOR CATHOLICS WHO JOIN MASONIC ASSOCIATIONS, issued on 7 May 2009. Among other things, it says:

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<sup>42</sup> *Masonic Bible*, p. 49.

<sup>43</sup> Lynn F. Perkins, *The Meaning of Masonry: A Popular Guide to the Values of Ancient and Modern Freemasonry*. Lakemont, Va.: Macoy, 1969, p. 95.

- 1) Any Catholic who is a member of any Masonic Association and participates in its programmes, or promotes its views, or holds any office therein, and refuses to renounce such membership despite at least one warning (cf. Canon 1347) is to be punished with an interdict (cf. Canon 1347), that is:
  - a. He is not allowed to receive Holy Communion and other sacraments (cf. Canon 1332).
  - b. He is prohibited to act as sponsor in Baptism and Confirmation.
  - c. He is not to be admitted as a member of parish or diocesan structures.
  - d. He is to be denied funeral rites, unless he shows some signs of repentance before death (Canon 1184 §1, no. 3).
  - e. Where funeral rites are allowed by the bishop, no Masonic service shall be allowed in the Church or cemetery immediately before or after the Church rites in order to avoid public scandal (cf. Canon 1184, §1, no. 3, and Canon 1374).
- 2) Any Catholic who is a convinced member of a Masonic Association and notoriously adheres to the Masonic vision is already considered to have incurred automatic excommunication (cf. Canon 1364). This means that the censures described in Canon 1331 automatically take full effect on this person.

According to Canon 1331 §1, an excommunicated person is forbidden:

- I. To have any ministerial participation in the celebration of the Eucharist or in any other ceremonies whatsoever of public worship.
- II. To celebrate the sacraments and sacramentals and to receive the sacraments.
- III. To discharge any ecclesiastical offices, ministries, or functions whatsoever, or to place acts of governance.

It is possible that some Catholics joined Freemasonry without knowing that it is forbidden to Catholics. Such people are advised to see their priests or their bishops who will assist them to renounce Freemasonry and avoid incurring the sanctions that will be imposed on them if they do not renounce Freemasonry.