

A BRIEF EXPOSITION OF FREEMASONRY.¹

BY THE EDITOR.

INTRODUCTORY.

AGAIN and again the claim has been made that freemasonry was founded by King Solomon, and that Hiram of Tyre was the first master of a masonic lodge in Jerusalem when he was building the temple on Mt. Zion. Sometimes even more extravagant statements are made in the assertions that freemasonry existed among the oldest civilizations of the world. But it goes without saying that these generalities are not based on truth, except in the sense that similar aspirations have existed in mankind at all times, long before the time when the first masonic lodges were founded in their present temples.

If we apply a strictly historical investigation to the subject we know that the first masonic lodges with their modern tendencies rose from stone-cutters' guilds in the beginning of the eighteenth century.

The medieval guilds were combinations of artisans quite similar in purpose to modern trades unions. They were fraternities which looked after the interests of the craft to which they belonged, and of the members of the guild who found protection in cases of emergency, in disease, in times of enforced idleness and in their struggles to maintain living wages. In distinction to modern guilds these medieval fraternities insisted on general rules of good conduct; they excluded unworthy men from becoming members, and kept up an *esprit du corps* in accordance with the times, introducing into their by-laws a decidedly religious element. The liberalism of this religious element became the seed of modern freemasonry. Since their religious aspirations were not determined

¹The details in this article are taken from a *Merkblatt über Freimaurerei* by Diedrich Bischoff, and although intended to be of a general character are based mainly on the conditions in German lodges.

by dogma, but by great breadth and charity in matters of conscience, they became so important that the original trade interests became of secondary consequence. Honorary members were admitted who were not stonemasons or masons, and finally the latter, active members of the craft, disappeared entirely. References to the masonic trade then became merely symbols and the religious spirit alone was dominant.

HISTORICAL SKETCH.

The first freemason lodges originated in London in 1717, from old fraternities of zealous stone-cutters whose history extends far back into the Middle Ages and is closely interwoven with the history of cathedral architecture. These fraternities attained a new purpose when their numbers were increased by members not belonging to the building trades. In this new form they became the models of the freemason lodges which soon spread from London over England, Scotland and Ireland and thence to the continent of Europe, and which now extend into all quarters of the earth and into almost every civilized country.

Today there are about 2400 recognized freemason lodges, with perhaps two million members. More than half of all the masons are in the United States of America. In Germany there are about 60,000, belonging to about 530 lodges. These lodges belong to eight different German associations of grand lodges independent of each other, with the exception of a few not affiliated with any grand lodge. These data refer solely to the so-called "recognized" masons. Besides these there are many other kinds of associations in Germany which likewise call themselves freemasons, but which have no connection with the freemasons organized in regular lodges and grand lodges.

Many leading spirits of the various nations have been members of freemasonry since its origin. In Germany, for instance, we can mention Lessing, Herder, Goethe, Wieland, Rückert, Mozart, Haydn, Fichte, Von Stein, Hardenberg, Blücher, and among other royal personages Frederick the Great, Emperor William I, and Emperor Frederick as well as his son William II.

From its beginning down to the present day freemasonry has been bitterly opposed by the Roman papacy. According to the view of the Vatican as it has been emphatically expressed in many important enactments, nothing in the world is more dangerous and more reprehensible than the purposes and aspirations of freemasonry. The very fact of this keen antipathy of the papacy dis-

played repeatedly from time to time, and on the other hand the affiliation of so many leading spirits, bear witness that in its fundamental intentions and effects freemasonry can not be shallow or insignificant.

Not at all times nor in all places have masons conceived and pursued the purport and significance of their cause in the same way. Freemasonry has lived through times of external progress and internal restraint, but also through times of stagnation and alienation from life. In Germany there is a constant internal development in freemasonry, inasmuch as the attempt is made seriously and successfully to bring its purpose and activities into harmony with the decisive progress, requirements and duties of the life of to-day. The greatest German poets have contributed not a little to deepen and broaden masonic ideals, and Mozart composed his opera "The Magic Flute" for the outspoken purpose of characterizing the masonic order.

SECRETS OF MASONRY.

Freemasons keep secret only certain signs of identification and rituals by means of which the unity of the members of associations scattered over all parts of the earth is made possible. In this way they guard against the possibility of people who do not belong to the masonic community forcing themselves into the confidence and into the ceremonies which build up their inner life and thus interfering with the efficiency of the brotherhood.

Masonic lodges do not pursue any secret hidden purpose. The direction of their intentions and activities is prescribed by certain fundamental ideas which are openly professed in masonic writings everywhere.

There is a common belief that the masonic order is a secret society, and this notion is based on the secret signs and grips by which its members recognize one another. Thus it has come to pass that the main aims of freemasonry are assumed to be a secret policy, but in fact there is no secrecy about them. The secrecy of masonic grips is a mere externality and is as unessential to freemasonry as are the secrets of student fraternities whose members are not allowed to betray the hidden meaning of the Greek letters by which they are called.

THE MASONIC IDEAL OF BROTHERHOOD.

The main tendency of freemasonry is the ideal of brotherhood which should unite all mankind. Freemasonry does not propose

to level social conditions to one type, but it tends to remove all hostility which may arise from social, national or religious differences. It condemns the haughtiness of the more powerful, more influential and richer classes, and strives after the establishment of peace on earth by removing all fanaticism and national hatred on account of differences of language, race, nationality, dogma and even color. The different classes should overcome their prejudices from which arise so many of the evils and jealousies among men. Freemasonry endeavors to develop a feeling of solidarity among all the members of human society, and believes that the higher a man ranges in the process of civilization, the surer he is to recognize his fellow men as brothers.

An association of people which lacks this unity between its parts is deficient in the main requirement for security and for the increase of its true value in its struggle to retain a place in history. Accordingly from the beginning freemasons have had in view an increase of brotherly feeling and a consciousness of solidarity among men and groups of men who otherwise would remain unsympathetic or hostile to each other.

THE BUILDING IDEA.

It is not the purpose of masonry to unite men through a common advantage. They are to become brothers in the moral realm, and it is in working for the upbuilding of humanity that masons find the common moral duty of all mankind. Every man and every nation has the same calling to contribute unceasingly to the uplift and ennoblement of human society. The entire direction of man's life (for instance his physical and mental education, his marriage and the rearing of his children, his part in the spiritual and social life of his age) is towards building up the present and future of the human race. His problem consists in employing his building material—beginning with the conscious education of himself, and an unselfish love of his family, country and humanity—so as to make of this social structure a place for the implanting and nurture of the highest possible spiritual life, a realm of perfect morality. According to the masonic conception mankind must be trained up to this royal art, this constant and skilful care for the wholesome, harmonious, universal condition of life and mind, if the correct moral consciousness of solidarity is to govern them, and if the body politic is to be endowed with the healthy soul requisite for its preservation and welfare. Only in the realm of work upon the upbuilding

of humanity can true unity and the desired spirit of brotherliness flourish among men and nations.

THE IDEA OF HUMANITY.

Every lodge meeting is designed to contribute to the cultivation of their ideal which they call "the royal art." Freemasons regard themselves as laborers who hew the blocks for the building stones of the temple of mankind, and they are conscious that their work is the highest of all. Where humanity is not nurtured brotherliness does not thrive, and workers on the temple of humanity become separated and disunited in moral training by different doctrinal systems. This is the main idea by which the purpose of masonry is characterized, namely the effort to foster the brotherhood of man by cultivating the innate social impulse to ennoble and beautify life.

LODGE-WORK.

The lodge brings together in a common ethical interest men who otherwise are far apart in life and would be separated from each other by a one-sided development of mind and interests, while it endeavors to make dominant in their inner lives the common will to labor for the temple of humanity. Members of lodges are to become brothers as disciples of the royal art which springs from the soul of humanity and aims at the perfection of human society.

This purpose is served in the first place by the temple ceremonies in which all take part and where the individual is encouraged to hold an inspection of his better self and to discover in the depths of his own emotional life his stock of building materials, his uncorrupted demand for social duty and righteousness. All this makes men recognize the sacred responsibility which each one shares for the external and internal welfare of the national life of the present and future. The purpose and content of the social architecture providing for the cultivation of this health and beauty is made perceptible to the apprentices again and again in a significant symbolism.

This cultivation of the moral and artistic spirit of brotherhood is perfected in earnest mental labor and a noble companionship amid the exclusive community of comrades striving towards the same goal and struggling for a profound conception of life. Outsiders are kept at a distance in order that the community spirit may operate the more deeply and with the greater harmony.

This community spirit does not find its expression in the letter of formulated dogmas prescribing for the individual a definite faith

and fealty, but merely in the symbolism of signs, forms, and words which grant to the disciple the most far-reaching mental liberty and constantly stimulate him to a search for truth on his own part. Symbolism, not dogmatism! This is a peculiarity of the masonic system of development which is of the greatest significance. To be sure the symbolic instruction is supplemented in the lodges by a liberal interchange of ideas on the correct aims and requirements of the structure of society and of social service, but this merely serves to cultivate freedom of knowledge in the individual. It is not true that definite theories of society are here inculcated in the guise of a masonic confession of faith.

By no means does the lodge subject its disciple to an authority compelling him to enter in a definite way for a definite social advancement. The masonic desire for association serves to cultivate in the individual an unhampered love of humanity. A manifestation of the bond for partisan purposes or as an organization for power is absolutely prohibited. When freemasons unite in behalf of a definite form of administration, when they become interested in elections, in industrial enterprises, or take a stand as to ecclesiastical polity, or favor special reforms in ethical culture, or popular education, or health regulations, or social service, etc., they never represent the masonic community as such. The true masonic bond consists in identity of conviction which has its roots in the ideals of brotherhood and humanity, not in identity of the presentation of the end and means by which this conviction manifests itself in the different walks of life.

It is a matter of course that a merely external membership in a masonic lodge is no guarantee of the existence of a properly masonic conviction. To many lodge members it rarely or never occurs to admit within themselves the spirit of freemasonry. When a freemason lacks the energy to cooperate he attains no real membership in the masonic community of thought.

In consideration of all this it is clear that the method of certain opponents to represent this or that alleged injurious political or other public activity of individual freemasons or masonic groups as an attribute or characteristic of true masonic work and lodge practice is absolutely misleading.

THE RELIGION OF RIGHTEOUSNESS.

"A mason is held under the obligation of the duty of his calling to observe the moral law; and if he rightly understands the art he will never be a stupid atheist and live without religious affiliation."

Thus we read in the "early duties" of the freemasons of the year 1723. Nevertheless it is at the same time incidentally emphasized that the lodge binds its members only to a religion of goodness, of loyalty and of righteousness "in which all men agree." The individual may pursue his particular religious conviction outside of the masonic community and let others do the same.

The lodge-work of to-day on the whole still starts from this traditional fundamental conception. It presupposes that true love for the social structure includes a religious veneration and constraint, and therefore it requires of the freemason a religion of righteousness, a strict observance of the moral law, and this conception also finds expression in the symbolism of masonry.

In all Germanic lodges, mention is made, with reference to the universal duties of all men toward the social structure, of a "master architect of the universe" to whom laborers on the structure of humanity should look, in their struggle for a creative fraternal spiritual life. This symbol of the freemasons serves to bring apprentices in the art to the consciousness that constructive effort after beauty which they recognize as the inmost requirement of their humanity, signifies the highest life. "A spiritual living and doing—higher, more universal, more permanent, constantly dominating our transitory and egotistic earthly pilgrimage—which finds expression in the progressive impulse of the human conscience and in the enlightened consciousness of good and evil in the individual, gives a vocation to every one and a sense and purpose to our existence. To this master architect and to his moral law the apprentice of the royal art should feel himself responsible and bound in faithful allegiance."

In freemasonry God is not a dogma, but a symbol. The word God stands for the authority of righteousness, and by believing in God masons mean that they recognize the principle that there is a moral ideal to be observed, and that this moral ideal is a binding principle of conduct for every human being. By its proposal to seek God freemasonry does not intend to spread a religious doctrine, but it uses this symbol to cultivate a moral idealism which insists on a feeling of responsibility and duty, and freemasons claim that in this point all men should agree if they are but rightly developed,—in spite of whatever different opinion they may cherish concerning the word God and church affiliations.

In this symbolism appealing to the soul's search after God the lodge does not serve the purpose of a propaganda of a religious system of doctrine but always leaves the interpretation to every

individual. Nevertheless, combined with this clear social consciousness of responsibility and duty there is a reverent, confiding and hopeful intention to keep sacred the ends and means of a true constructive justice and love for humanity revealed in the human soul. This religion of upbuilding mankind and of constructive righteousness appears to freemasons to be the most efficacious leaven of true brotherliness. In this religion—they hold—all men agree on a correct self-knowledge no matter to what diversity in world-conceptions, ideas with regard to God and ecclesiastical affiliations they may be devoted. For this religion therefore the friend of human brotherhood should prepare the soil with affection and with an open mind.

THE DIFFERENT SYSTEMS.

The lodge work is not organized in the same way in all associations calling themselves freemasons. The lodges in Latin countries, for instance, carry on the exercise of their masonic convictions in part according to a program which differs in many particulars from the Germanic practice. Thus there are some among them who have removed the symbol of the “master architect of the universe” from their system of work. They have come to this point because they feared that this image might be erroneously considered as a dogmatic God-conception in the sense of one or another ecclesiastical dogma. This should not be taken as an evidence of any tendency towards negative, irreligious or anti-Christian views, or towards irreverence or atheism.

The recognized German masonic lodges do not accept “atheists” on principle. Men who ascribe no reality to the ideas of good and moral, and to whom accordingly the application in the lodge of the symbolism of a master architect of the universe would be false and foolish, do not belong in a community built upon the religion of righteousness and the observance of ethics. One does not expect any advancement of a creative idealism from those who expressly deny the character of a higher super-individual spiritual life to human longing for beauty and moral consciousness, and who object to the assumption that every one in his own person assumes the task of building up, and our whole existence receives a creative sense through such a higher, more universal and more permanent life and that the God-conception is the symbol of the human ideal of truth, justice and right. A man who maintains that human life is void of purpose will, according to the conception of the recognized

German lodge, prove unfit to be a representative of that true and efficient fraternity.

But there are some differences in the systems of the recognized German lodges. Two grand lodges admit only professing Christians as regular members, because in their work of humanization and fraternization they utilize symbols of traditional Christianity and are particularly concerned with the evaluation of essentially Christian traditions.

There is no universal organization and international activity of masonic lodges. The grand lodges of different countries are not bound by any sort of common general council. There is merely an international masonic business headquarters at Neuchâtel in Switzerland (Beaux-Arts 26), which issues reports of the various masonic organizations and serves similar purposes of mutual information.

TOLERANCE.

The conviction that the will and the capability for independent discovery and for a realization of the true, the good and the beautiful are present in an ever increasing measure in the natural dispositions of men, causes freemasons to regard as dangerous and immoral the intolerant depreciation and suppression of any effort to search for the truth. Therefore freemasons stand for freedom of mind and conscience and the toleration of all theories whose representatives do not oppose the cultivation of humanity and the brotherhood of man and do not attempt to suppress others arrogantly and domineeringly in their freedom of thought.

German freemasonry keeps perfectly neutral with regard to religious convictions and in fact its members belong to very different religious and ecclesiastical denominations. Only those religious beliefs which do violence to the faith of other people or suppress the culture of humanity and the brotherhood of man find a natural enemy in freemasonry.

In the lodges themselves every intolerance is checked by the fact that no contention for or against ecclesiastical or political partisan views is allowed. Only by way of a tolerant brotherly search for the truth do they discuss the social constructive work of state and church in the masonic search for wisdom.

THE VALUE OF FREEMASONRY.

When the peculiar masonic work of fraternization in its performance does justice in every respect to its leading ideas, it sig-

nifies for the common life of humanity an important element of true progressive evolution.

The spirit of genuine masonic work acts as a leaven in national and international life and can be dispensed with to-day even less than formerly. Its extension is highly necessary. Otherwise because of a great lack in genuine moral consciousness of solidarity the most significant virtues of national life in internal and external struggles will sooner or later disappear. The particular masonic method of humanization, taking possession as it does of the inner life, can not be dispensed with in the education of a people where it is important to make accessible the sources of a remedial ethical truth and moral authority in the spiritual world of to-day, which demands independence of thought.

THE OPPONENTS OF MASONRY.

In striking contrast to the masonic conceptions and aspirations stand those who regard the humanitarian ideal as a gross error, maintaining that human nature does not possess any moral aptitude, that man can be saved only by an indiscriminating submission under a definite doctrinal system of sin and destruction. With this hostile opinion is often united the conviction that those of another faith—infidels and heretics who do not recognize a definite doctrinal system—are morally of little value, that the spread of their teaching ought not to be permitted and that believers should be separated from them as rigorously as possible and that the contrast be sharply emphasized. Advocates of these views, representatives of intolerance and exclusion who work in opposition to freedom of spirit, to humanitarian fraternization and the independent development of national morality, have fought against freemasonry from the beginning with the sharpest weapons, and have purposely brought it into the repute of the most destructive devil worship in the minds of many of their followers, a tendency which has produced the most ridiculous fictions.

Masonry meets with a different sort of opposition from those who look for salvation solely in political and other similar partisan aspirations, who worship success, who live in the delusion that they are the true politicians and have no vision for the great and decisive necessities of a thought culture and development of a community soul. To these the masonic association has nothing to offer because in its ranks it permits no politics of power and party but much rather in every estimation of other forces of civilization places its hopes for progress most decisively in a truthful moral

consciousness of solidarity, without which, in its opinion, intelligence and technical skill of individuals and communities can not construct any prosperous future. The masonic order is thus particularly ridiculed by people whose only god is success, who do not with masonry see in the moral ideals of humanity the great decisive realities and truths of life, but with materialism look upon them as the fancies of individuals which at best have proved of general utility.

Others again condemn the masons for exclusiveness and an air of mystery without inquiring at all into the nature and justification of the so-called masonic secrets.

On the whole the critics of freemasonry are composed for the most part of wisecracks who criticize and talk about this peculiar community but have never succeeded in studying their efforts conscientiously. Finally many imagine that they have grasped the spiritual content of the whole masonic system if they happen to know a few lodge members who may perhaps be themselves far from the inner meaning of the whole affair.

How few to-day really know and understand genuine masonry and its cult of a creative love for humanity and for one's brother. This masonic endeavor is pretty remote from the views and interests which the life of to-day imparts to every-day men. Moreover for a long time it has been in the public mind the object of a partly unintelligible, partly malicious, but at any rate entirely misleading hostile description and account, whereas the freemasons express themselves only in a very limited measure about their affairs and rarely get word into the press which does not like to enter into matters which are not purely practical. Nevertheless we confess that in recent times masonry has met with an increased interest in its struggles and aspirations.