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VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS AND CIVIL RELIGION: THE CASE OF FREEMASONRY

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A random sample survey of Freemasons in a Midwestern state shows that they mainly are drawn from higher socioeconomic strata, although less so than 20 years ago. Most members described themselves as inactive and unfamiliar with lodge proceedings, yet they exhibit staunch loyalty to the Order and firm commitment to its ideals. This paradox is resolved with the help of ideas drawn from Bellah's writings on civil religion.

In the United States, voluntary associations perform a variety of functions. For the individual they provide affective support and a sense of solidarity with others who have similar interests. For society as a whole they can "be considered as integrative entities at the community, state, regional, or national level" (Babchuk and Edwards, 1973:265; see also, Cutler, 1973:135; Rose, 1967:229-233). Perhaps no secondary association fills the interstices between the family and the larger community so well as the fraternal order, with its special mixture of private pleasures and public service. The fraternity is both a haven, in which private interests and gratifications can be pursued, and a social action group, through which public commitments can be expressed. This dual role of fraternities is of special interest to me in this paper.

The epitome of fraternalism in the United States is Freemasonry. It serves as the model for most other fraternal orders. It is to be expected that it, too, will function as a link between the private and public spheres. But Freemasonry is to some extent a special case among fraternities. Much more than any other order it stresses esoteric learning and the promulgation of a moral system grounded in religious belief. Its quasi-religious character is witnessed by the hostility with which it has been treated by many of the more orthodox religious bodies (Myers, 1960).

In conducting this study I was guided by a number of expectations about the membership of Freemasonry, most of them derived from the research literature on fraternities and kindred organizations. I expected that, as is true of voluntary associations in general (Smith and Freeman, 1972:154), the Masons would be more heavily middle class than the general population. Looking at their level of involvement in the fraternity, I expected to find that few members would be highly active in lodge affairs and that those who occupy leadership positions would be drawn disproportionately from the higher socioeconomic strata. I also, of course, expected that expressive orientations would be more common among members than instrumental ones.

We shall see that most of these expectations were confirmed. But data analysis revealed an apparent paradox in membership commitment. The data report a largely inactive membership, which, at the same time, is staunchly loyal to the principles of Freemasonry and convinced of its value as a means of moral education and training for citizenship. It has been reported before that fraternal orders tend to have the most loyal following (Babchuk and Booth, 1973:28); the Masons are no exception in this regard. I will attempt to resolve this paradox by taking into account the role of the Shriners in the decision to become a Mason, for there is a suggestion in these data that membership of the Blue Lodge is being used only as a "way station" for membership of the Shrine.

In the second part of the paper I will comment on the function of membership in the fraternity. Masons see themselves as members of a special kind of fraternity, having a quasi-religious character others lack. Much of what the order teaches is a vigorous defense of values deemed especially American. Masonic literature and, as we shall see, the attitudes of members reflect a certain image of the United States which, following Bellah's (1970:182) suggestion, I will characterize as civil religion.

That Freemasonry is part of the American Civil Religion has also been argued by Jolicoeur and Knowles (1978). From a content analysis of Masonic literature they found that many of the themes identified by Bellah as characteristic of civil religion occurred with great regularity. There was, first, a staunch defense of the American Constitution and the identification of that document (and the Bill of Rights) as inspired by Masonic thought. Second, repeated references were found to a rather abstractly conceived Supreme Being. Third, there occurred a spirited defense of what Jolicouer and Knowles (1978:16) refer to as "the republican virtues"—individual freeedom, free enterprise, a limited role for the state, and law as the basis of social order. The data on members' attitudes toward various aspects of the order's activities and mission gathered in this study lend support to this interpretation. Freemasons, besides explicitly promulgating values of voluntarism, fraternity, and individual liberty, also treat being religious and being political as ultimate values, without making commitments as to the specific form this fusion of religion and politics should take. The significance of membership in Freemasonry can be appreciated only if we ignore the fact that it is supposedly a secret society and concentrate instead on its more symbolic role as providing generalized support for citizenship.

METHODS

Although much has been written about Freemasonry, no sociological survey of the characteristics and attitudes of its members by a non-Mason has been published. The data reported in this paper were gathered by means of a random sample survey of the members of a Grand Lodge the jurisdiction of which is coterminous with the boundaries of one of the states in the Midwest. The project was approved by Grand Lodge officials, who advised on the phrasing of certain items although they exercised no censorship.

The initial mailing to nine hundred members was accompanied by a cover letter from the Master of the Grand Lodge urging the completion and return of the questionnaire. Despite two follow-up mailings, the response rate could not be pushed above 37 percent. Without access to the

mailing list of the Grand Lodge, it was not possible to identify nonrespondents. Clearly, only the most tentative generalizations can be made on the basis of these data alone. Furthermore, we cannot be sure that the members of a Midwestern Lodge are typical of all American Masons. However, these data do provide information which has not hitherto been available to sociologists interested in fraternal orders, and their implications are certainly worth reporting.

The questionnaire consisted of three parts: items on the member's level and type of participation in the Blue Lodge and other Masonic bodies; items designed to elicit the individual's attitude toward the lodge and the craft in general; and, finally, items having to do with the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of the respondent. Analysis of the data focuses on the two major concerns of this paper: the characteristics of Freemasonry as a voluntary association and its function as part of the civil religion.

FREEMASONRY AS A VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION

The basic unit of Freemasonry is the Blue Lodge, which is made up of Master Masons who have completed the first three degrees of Masonry. Membership of the Lodge is granted only to those who believe in a Supreme Being and are over 21, male, literate, physically able, and "free born." There are no blacks in the Scottish Rite (Schmidt and Babchuk, 1973:276).

Table 1 compares occupational, income, and educational information gathered in this study with what the Census Bureau tells us about adult males in the state in which this survey was conducted. As expected, Masons are more heavily middle class than the general population. Especially noteworthy is the overrepresentation of the professional and managerial categories and the large percentage difference in the proportion reporting some college experience. In a study conducted in another state Whipple (1969:105) found that only 30 percent of the initiates were drawn from the professional and managerial ranks, so we must be careful about generalizing on the basis of these data.

Some of the discrepancy between Whipple's findings and those reported here can be attributed to the nature of Whipple's sample, which, being composed of initiates, probably contained a higher proportion of younger men than would be found in the general population or in a general survey of all Masons. These younger men would in all likelihood be of lower socioeconomic status. Taking age into account when considering the socioeconomic status of Masons is very important, especially in view of the fact that age and socioeconomic status tend to be positively correlated. The age distribution of this sample was skewed toward the older age groups. Sixty percent were over 50 compared with 35.4 percent in the state as a whole. No doubt part of the middle-class bias of the sample is due to its age distribution.

Whipple's findings raise the question of whether or not those entering Freemasonry now have the same status as those who entered years ago. I compared Masons who joined within the last 10 years with those who had been Masons for 20 years or more, adjusting for possible period and cohort effects by controlling for age. Although income levels had not changed,

Table 1

MDUCATION, OCCUPATION AND FAMILY INCOME OF FREEMASONS

AND MALES OVER 15 IN A MID-WEST STATE

	1975 Cer	nsus ^a	Masons (1977)			
	N (in thousands	.	N (338)	Percent		
Education						
Elementary	112	18.7	26	8.7		
High School	286	47.9	122	36.0		
College	198	33.2	184	54.4		
No answer	-	-	-	-		
Occupation						
Professional	88	13.0	110	35.3		
Managerial	90	13.3	80	25.7		
Sales	35	5 .2	26	8.3		
Clerical	35	5.2	17	5.4		
Craftsmen	138	20.5	37	11.9		
Operatives	157	23.3	19	6.1		
Service	49	7.2	0	0.0		
Farm	80	11.9	23	7.4		
No answer	_	-	-	••		
Total Family Income ^c						
Less than \$9,999	178	30.3	80	23.6		
10,000 - 14,999	155	26.4	66	19.5		
15,000 - 19,999	106	18.0	50	14.8		
20,000 - 24,999	65	11.0	50	14.8		
25,000 and over	83	14.1	82	24.2		

^aU.S. Bureau of Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-60, No. 111, "Money and Income and Poverty Status in 1975 of Families and Persons in the United States and the North Central Region, by Divisions and States."

Masons who joined prior to 1955 were 33 percent more likely to have managerial or professional jobs and 19 percent more likely to have obtained a college degree. From this sample, at least, there are clear signs of declining socioeconomic status among Freemasons as a whole, a decline that might have important consequences for the order, some of which I will discuss in the conclusion.

 $^{^{\}mathrm{b}}\mathrm{Years}$ of school completed by those over 25 in 1975.

CWhites only.

A number of expectations informed the analysis of pattern of involvement in Freemasonry. We know that most members of voluntary associations are rather inactive (Axelrod, 1973:40). We also know that in most voluntary associations members of higher socioeconomic status are more likely to hold office (Sills, 1957:20). Given the emphasis on tradition, accumulated wisdom, and continuity in Freemasonry, I expected the older and more experienced Masons to be the most active. Finally, I anticipated that expressive rather than instrumental kinds of participation would predominate.

- (1) A very large proportion (81.4 percent) of the sample describe themselves as "inactive" or "somewhat inactive" in the affairs of their lodge. Only one-third keep "well informed" about what is going on in the lodge and three-quarters had missed all or most of the "stated communications" the previous year.
- (2) Table 2 shows that the expected correlation between socioeconomic status and activity level does not appear. Holding other factors constant, the beta coefficient of socioeconomic status and activity level is only .10. Nor is it true, as we might have expected, that officeholding is more typical of higher socioeconomic groups in the Masons. Among those under 65, no relation at all between income or education and officeholding emerged; occupation was very weakly correlated (.16, p = .001).

Table 2
INTERCORRELATIONS OF MEMBERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS

Variables	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Number of Years a Mason	07	.12 ^a	.08	06	.62 ^a	19	.28 ^a	03
Grandfather and Father a Mason		.11 ^a	.12ª	03 ^a	17 ^a	05 ^a	11	.17 ^a
3. Number of Friends Masons			.04	08	.06	.14ª	05	.01
4. Frequency of Church Attendance				03	.03	.20ª	02	.12ª
5. Size of Community					.06	17 ^a	02	.12ª
6. Age						.09ª	.33 ^a	26ª
7. Level of Activity							.06	.19ª
8. Localism ^C								.02
9. SES								

^aSignificant beyond the .05 level of confidence

b_{Level} of activity measured by number of stated and emergent communications missed the previous year, number of masonic funerals attended and self-ratings of overall level of activity.

CLocalism measured by three items: "How long have you lived in the community in which you now reside?"; "What are your chances of moving in the next two or three years?"; "Do you own the home in which you live or do you rent?"

- (3) Table 2 shows only weak associations between age and level of activity, but multiple regression shows a beta coefficient of .25 when age is isolated. This probably reflects the greater importance older Masons attribute to the fellowship and benevolence a lodge provides. Curiously, however, level of activity is inversely related to number of membership years (beta, -.167). It seems as if, whatever the age of joining, becoming a member is followed by a flurry of activity which subsides over time.
- (4) It is commonly accepted that all voluntary associations have both instrumental and expressive dimensions. Instrumental interests are those which have some consequence for the wider community; expressive interests are self-contained and concern the intrinsic satisfactions derived from participation itself (Edwards and Booth, 1973a:1).

The goals of Freemasonry are primarily expressive, and it is this aspect of the order which is more important to the membership. For example, 63 percent agree that: "Although Freemasonry does good works in the community, what I most like about it is the fellowship and enjoyment I get out of lodge meetings." Only one-third see the order as a "mainly charitable organization."

The multiplicity of goals in an organization like Freemasonry means that different people can find different satisfactions in it. Edwards and Booth (1973b:280), assuming a "strain toward consistency" between occupation and orientation toward voluntary association membership, hypothesize that service and manual workers, "whose occupational rewards are more or less immediate, would be most likely to engage in expressive activities." Professionals and others who hold jobs in which "the net rewards... are postponed" would, they suggest, exhibit a similarly instrumental attitude toward voluntary work "in which rewards are also deferred." In order to test this hypothesis, an instrumental/expressive scale adapted from Jacoby and Babchuk (1963) was incorporated in the questionnaire. The data do not invalidate the hypothesis, but the beta of 0.1 for the relationship between occupational category and instrumentalism (independent, that is, of income, education, age, and Mason years) shows how weak the relationship is for these Masons.

Income level was somewhat more strongly and positively associated with instrumental orientation (beta, 0.23). It seems as if the service side of the order is more attractive to those with more discretionary income. If higher income members are more outward looking in this sense, they are also more likely to see their membership of the order as one of a general constellation of secondary involvements. In other words, they are more likely to belong to other voluntary associations and more likely to belong to other Masonic bodies. Furthermore, they are more likely to feel that one of the most important goals of the order is that of serving others.

These data confirm the suspicions of Edwards and Booth. Middle-class members are using the order for different purposes. Possibly, they are using it more formally as an instrument for community involvement, as a public activity that is bound up tightly with other aspects of their more public lives. Lower status members (who are just as regular in their attendance) are more oriented toward the private concerns of fellowship

and probably look to the lodge primarily for moral support, catharsis, and comfort

The data on participation in the order show that most Masons are not regular attenders at lodge meetings and are not very well informed about what is going on in the lodge. There is no marked variation in level of participation by socioeconomic status, age being the only demographic factor to influence depth of involvement. Added to these signs of apathy is a rather extensive ignorance about some of the more basic teachings of the order. Respondents were asked to answer a series of 12 statements about some of the symbolism and insignia of Freemasonry with a simple "correct/false" choice. For example, they were asked: "Which of the following are the symbols of the Fellow Craft degree: (1) Level; (2) Plumb; (3) Trowel; (4) Beehive?" Only 5 percent could answer none of these questions correctly, and 69 percent answered half of them correctly, but only 29 percent gave correct answers to three-quarters and only 3 percent got them all right.

The Masons are not unique in having a rather apathetic and unknowing membership. But there are some other data in this survey which make the case of the Masons particularly interesting. Low levels of participation could reasonably be taken as a sign of loose attachment to an organization. But Masons are loyal to the order: 62 percent of this sample had been members for over 20 years. Furthermore, if we examine the attitudes reflected in Table 3, we find a keen interest in the ritual aspects of the lodge; its teachings are clearly regarded as important.

In these and several other responses, Masons show no disaffection with the elaborate ritual so commonly associated with the craft nor do they show much sign of feeling that the teachings of the craft are irrelevant to

Table 3

ATTITUDES TOWARD RITUAL AND TEACHINGS AMONG FREEMASONS

(Fercent)

	Completely Agree	Agree Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly	No Answer
The secret rituals are an essential part of the craft for me	47.0	26.3	9.8	10.7	6.2
Formal ceremonies are among the most important part of lodge meetings	54.1	21.3	9.2	7.7	7.7
A Mason must increase his knowledge of the teachings of the craft	57.7	30.2	6.8	1.8	3.6
The teachings of Freemasonry will help banish ignorance among all peoples		26.9	12.7	18.9	7.1

their daily concerns. It is as if the members are committed to the *idea* of Freemasonry without being prepared to make the commitment to its practice. One is reminded here of those people who report to pollsters that, although they do not themselves practice devotions or attend church frequently, they look upon religion as "a good thing."

There is a rather pragmatic solution to this apparent paradox. Membership in the Blue Lodge is a requisite for membership of the Scottish and York Rites and of the Shrine. It is no secret among Masons that, compared to meetings of the Shrine, lodge meetings can be rather dull. It might well be that some of this inactivity in lodge affairs is associated with the fact that many Masons become members of the lodge, pay dues to the lodge, and retain a formal commitment to the principles for which it stands but devote their energies and interests to the activities of the Shrine. It is quite significant that 48 percent of this sample reported that the Shriners had been "very" or "quite" important to them when deciding to become a Mason. There is no doubt some truth to this idea, but it is not the whole answer, for it ignores some of the more profound aspects of membership in a fraternity that, more than any other, expects a commitment to learning, moral education, and the attachment of fraternal duties to a value system. It is straining credibility to argue that Freemasonry operates merely as a way station to the Shrine.

FREEMASONRY AND CIVIL RELIGION

I indicated at the beginning of this paper that the way to resolve the paradox between formal commitment to the *idea* of the order and considerable apathy about its specific activities is to look at the meaning of the support Freemasons give to citizenship. I pointed out that the order, while it is partisan in neither politics nor religion, espouses the causes of politics and religion in the abstract, combining them in a version of citizenship which is quite congruent with the principles of conduct laid down for Americans in most versions of the civil religion described by Bellah.

Jolicoeur and Knowles have already presented some clues as to the function of Freemasonry in this regard, and it is the purpose of this section to examine the survey data for any support that might be found for their interpretation of Freemasonry and for a way of resolving the paradox I have described. The most powerful theme identified by Jolicoeur and Knowles in Masonic literature is that of increasing "the level of understanding of the citizenry concerning the mythology of America, its origins and its enemies." Freemasons themselves claim to have "conceived, argued and ratified" the Constitution (Clausen, 1976:16). Nearly one-fifth of the articles sampled by Jolicoeur and Knowles mentioned the Constitution; 11.5 percent of them, the Declaration of Independence. This theme of training for citizenship is reflected in the survey data: 78 percent of the sample agreed that one of the most important functions of being a Mason is that it makes a man a better citizen. Eighty-one percent agreed that Masons make the most loyal citizens.

The Deistic theme identified by Bellah as part of the civil religion was discerned in the Masonic literature; 46 percent of the articles reviewed mention "God" or "the Supreme Being" (Jolicoeur and Knowles, 1978:12).

Belief in a Supreme Being is, of course, a requirement for membership in the Masons. Ninety-one percent of this sample affirmed a belief in God. Masons clearly are a religious people, but they do not see their order as competing with more orthodox religious bodies, although they are well aware of the fact that many such groups (e.g., Catholics, Lutherans, Mormons) are hostile to them. Instead, Masons see their subscription to a belief in God as the Supreme Architect as part of the system of Deistic beliefs which lie at the core of the American value system enshrined in the very Constitution the Masons helped write. They therefore regard themselves as a valuable adjunct to the established denominations, most particularly the "mainstream" denominations traditionally associated with the white middle class: Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians comprise 58 percent of the Masons in this sample, compared with 27 percent of the national population.

We have seen that a third theme identified by Jolicoeur and Knowles is that of Freemasonry as defender of "the republican virtues." Freemasons see themselves as helping sustain and defend from internal and external threat the values of the free enterprise system. A sense of mission in this regard is quite obvious from even the most casual perusal of Masonic

Table 4

ATTITUDES OF FREEMASONS TOWARD THE PURPOSES OF FREEMASONRY

(Percent)

		Completely Agree	Agree Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly	No Answer
1.	The order should not become involved in controversial social issues	44.4	18.3	19.8	13.0	4.4
2.	Although Freemasonry does good works in the community, what I like most about it is the fellowship	31.7	27.5	21.0	13.6	6.2
3.	Freemasonry is mainly a charitable organiza- tion to help the dis- advantaged	13.9	17.8	28.4	34.0	5.9
4.	Spreading Masonic philosophy is not so important these days as performing service	14.5	21.0	33.4	25.1	5.9
5.	Becoming a Mason meant a kind of rebirth for me	32.2	30.5	20.4	12.7	4.1
6.	Freemasonry teaches each individual to perform his duties as a citizen	40.5	34.0	11.5	8.9	5.0

literature. But it is important to note that this mission is cast in traditionally individualistic terms. The responses to the questionnaire shown in Table 4 add support to the content analysis. The majority of Masons eschew involvement in social reform programs (item 1). Although their charitable work is well publicized, especially through Shriner activity, the majority of members do not see the purpose of the order as that of helping the less fortunate (items 2, 3, and 4). Conversely, they give strong support to ideas that exalt the service of the order for the individual and the way it teaches individual duties and obligations (items 5 and 6). Jolicoeur and Knowles report that Masonic literature reflects a heavy emphasis on building character as a means of building societies, on the moral education of individuals as opposed to the social reconstruction of communities. These survey data lend credibility to their findings.

The membership requirements of Freemasonry provide a further indication of its advocacy of individualism and self-reliance; members are expected to be sober, hardworking, honest, and, perhaps above all, civic-minded. The Masons in this sample were more than diligent in their exercise of civic duties. Two thirds were members of at least one other voluntary association, 88 percent were members of a religious denomination, and 92 percent had voted in the last presidential election (compared with 60 percent of the male population nationwide). Thus, while refraining from party politics and espousing no particular religion, they promote the ideas of being political and religious. It is exactly this combination of political and religious Americanism which Bellah characterized as civil religion.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have presented data which show that Masons by and large confirm the empirical generalizations about America's "joiners." They tend to be of higher socioeconomic status and to be active in other voluntary associations. I have also shown that Freemasonry is more than just another voluntary association and have suggested that it can best be understood as part of the civil religion. Its activities are, in fact, a kind of perpetual morality play in which the meaning and implications of fraternalism are dramatized.

In suggesting that Freemasonry—which is chiefly middle class, wholly male (except for auxiliaries), and entirely segregated—is part of civil religion, I am recognizing that civil religion is "not so neutral as its designators would have it; it is a reflection of a WASP apprehension of the world" (Marty, 1974:144). Freemasonry has been a ritualized celebration of the American experience as filtered through the values and interests of the white adult male. This makes the suggestion that the socioeconomic status of the membership is declining particularly interesting, for it raises the possibility that the adherence of the order to strictly middle-class values might in the future begin to waiver. The imponderable here is the role the Shriners play in attracting recruits to Freemasonry; it would seem that the Shrine neither enjoys nor seeks the elite status once characteristic of Masons. Any increase in the use of Masonry as a "way station" to the

Shriners might well accelerate the changes which would be due to declining socioeconomic status alone.

Finally, it is necessary to comment on two aspects of Freemasonry which are popularly and traditionally associated with the craft, but which are barely mentioned in either this report or that of Jolicoeur and Knowles: its fraternalism and its secrecy. The comfort and assurance that Masons derive from the knowledge that they would be assisted by brother Masons if distressed was clear from the replies to this survey. But the "brotherhood" which Freemasonry espouses as a principle is no universal fraternalism. Excluded from the Masons' brotherhood are minority groups. They are excluded theoretically by defining "Americanism" in such a way as to render their values, lifestyle, and achievements un-American. They are excluded practically by a system of membership selection which places great emphasis on personal contacts and knowledge of "character." Fraternalism serves the purpose of exclusion more than inclusion, as the word might imply.

We can also now better understand the role of secrecy in modern Freemasonry. It has long been acknowledged that Freemasons are no longer a secret society: all their secrets have been revealed (Simmel, 1950:356). The appeal of Freemasonry today lies not in its esoteric lore or arcane rituals but in its privacy. Freemasonry stands for the right to pursue private pleasures privately. As an organization it undertakes to protect not the deep secrets of the craft but the right of each member to a private sphere in which public demands have no place. The values for which Freemasonry publicly stands are precisely those values which will protect this private sphere, most especially those values having to do with individual freedom. It is this link between the private and the public (with which I began this paper) that Freemasonry forges, and it is this function, I am arguing, which is the chief appeal of the order today.

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