

Masonic Penalties

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In recent years, a movement has developed to do away with the traditional penalties associated with the most basic of a Mason's obligations as a member of the fraternity. In Pennsylvania, for example, along with some other states, the alterations passed without much notice by the rest of the world, but in some cases, notably that of the Grand Lodge of England in early 1987, this change has been deemed sufficiently significant that the news was reported on network radio and in major metropolitan newspapers.

Unfortunately, the treatment given by reporters was at best light, if not derisive. Can we consider a change that has made the Craft a subject of amusement to be beneficial? And what are the causes that have impelled this change after so many years?

The origins of Masonic penalties have been reviewed in a number of Masonic journals at some length. Reference is often made to the Mysteries of ancient Greece and Rome, whose initiates were required to bind themselves under stringent threats of bodily harm before the secrets of the gods were revealed. Although there is no evidence of the direct transmission of these penalties from the ancient mystagogues to the founders of Freemasonry, in human cultures, concepts once introduced are likely to recur when similar situations arise, especially if those concepts serve a useful purpose. It is therefore worthwhile to investigate the purposes that the penalties associated with Freemasonry might serve.

The first point to be dealt with is that the actual penalties that may be inflicted upon a Mason by his brothers, which is to say the organized structure of the Craft are those of reprimand (also called admonition), suspension, and expulsion, and no others. This information is clearly stated in monitors. In the Pennsylvania Grand Jurisdiction, for example, it is these penalties that now are identified to the candidate when he comes under obligation. The Morgan Affair notwithstanding, there are no authentic records of other penalties being exacted for unMasonic conduct. Until the recent changes, to continue with the Pennsylvania example, it was made clear to the candidate that the penalties described were only symbolic. Under these circumstances, it cannot have been concern for the candidate's state of mind that led to the change, since it was one of form rather than substance. Discreet inquiries elicited the information that it was pressure from outside organizations that motivated these alterations in the ritual.

This should be a matter of concern for all Masons. The historical degrees of the Scottish and York Rites caution us more than once of the dangers to free men of the influence of groups not organized around principles of freedom. Besides the threats to the Craft posed by the numerous totalitarian regimes of the world--

threats we are probably aware of and prepared to face--there is within our own free country a developing adversary attitude towards a free-thinking and selective organization such as ours.

For example, Masonic lodges are no longer welcome on military bases because they are selective of membership--a far cry from the time of George Washington, when the traveling lodge played a vital role in the morale of the soldier. A misguided spirit of "egalitarianism" has subordinated the rights of free assembly for individuals when charges of discrimination are brought. In recent Senate confirmation hearings for an appellate judge, the attempt was made to consider Masonic membership a disqualifying element for public service, no matter the long history of service by Freemasons in all branches of the Federal and state governments. Given these circumstances, it seems particularly unwise at this time to make accommodations to the demands of outside organizations for changes in the ritual; this creates a precedent for other alterations that would undermine our landmarks and perhaps threaten the very existence of the Fraternity.

Moving on from the matter of why the changes may be taking place, we turn to the Masonic purposes that the penalties, symbolic though they are, may serve. As we have noted, the penalties being discussed may not be inflicted on a Mason by his brothers. Indeed, the language and nature of the obligation shows this. A Mason's obligation is an undertaking between him and Almighty God, not a contract between him and the Lodge or any other group of men. This is why such an obligation cannot be laid aside--it is not in the power of the Master of the Lodge, nor of any man, to dissolve such an undertaking. Thus we see that the penalties are invoked by the candidate upon himself, freely and voluntarily, as a reminder of the serious and weighty nature of his obligations. A child may "cross my heart and hope to die" without being taken seriously, but a mature adult, and we consider no others for Masonic membership, should understand clearly that an obligation falsely sworn before God is an offense against the Third Commandment and merits severe consequences. In the legendary history of the Craft, although for a different offense, certain craftsmen invoked upon themselves just such punishments as we here allude to. Only after declaring themselves liable to such penalties were they subjected to them.

Turning from legendary history to more authentically recorded events, it is worthwhile to note that the penalty of death has often been inflicted upon Masons by governments and other organizations. Jacques deMolay is merely the example best-known to most of us, through the recounting of his martyrdom in Masonic degrees. Within the lifetimes of some of us, many Masons perished under Hitler for no crime other than that of belonging to an organization that allows each man to think for himself. Indeed, the Nazis came for the Freemasons well before they came for the Jews. Tyrants have long understood the threat that an organized

group of free men poses to their rule. The Soviet Union published anti-Masonic literature in profusion, and Masonry has been suppressed in Iran. Penalties of great severity belong in our ritual as a reminder that any or all of us may be at some time called upon to pay the ultimate price for our belief in freedom, as represented by our membership in the Craft.

Since the symbolic penalties of Masonic obligations serve the purpose of reminding us of the seriousness of our undertakings and of the possible consequences of membership at the hands of outside organizations, it is with the utmost care that we should consider modifications to this element of Freemasonry, especially in the interest of satisfying the objections of an outside group. In the pursuit of more members, many suggestions have been made that would alter long-established usages, to paraphrase Jefferson. Let us never forget that quantity is not a valid substitute for quality. Better that we should have fewer Masons, and those sincerely committed, than a large body uncertain of their goals and unsure of their purpose.