

NUMINOUS MASONRY
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The general public conceives of masonry as a secret society and as a society that has secrets. When my petition for membership was being considered, I was asked why I wanted to become a Mason. I gave the usual reasons; Masons were known as good men, many of the notable men of our society whom I admired and respected were Masons, masonry's charitable activities were well known, and so on. There was another reason, of which I was only somewhat aware, involving the secrets of masonry. Masonry does not claim to being a religion, but does assert that it is religious. What do we mean when we say that? Rudolph Otto, in his book, The Idea of the Holy, called attention to the fact that the word "religious" encompasses two distinct aspects, the one rational, the other nonrational. What we ordinarily encounter as religious experiences are church attendance, inspirational talks, bible study, and the like, under a Theistic conception of the divinity, which characterizes the deity by attributes such as spirit, power, reason, purpose and so forth. These concepts and practices can be grasped by the intellect, analyzed by thought, defined, communicated and can be understood (Otto p.3). They constitute the rational side of religious experience.

Masonry has a rational belief system, consisting of signs, symbols and traditions with which to communicate its moral precepts. As a rational system, it can be defined, communicated and taught. But in its nonrational religious character, it cannot be defined in rational terms. We recall Otto's distinction between the rational and nonrational aspects of religious experience. Finding no other word that appropriately

described the nonrational aspect, Otto proposed the word “numinous” when speaking of the indefinable “other” that characterizes the nonrational aspect of religious (spiritual) experience. The numinous is defined by Merriam -Webster as “filled with a sense of the presence of divinity” (merriam-webster.com).

The word “numinous” refers to that aspect of religious thought that is undefinable and unknowable; that which we can experience but not directly communicate. Although it cannot be described in itself, it can be discussed conceptually. Otherwise, said Otto, mysticism could exist only in silence, whereas mystics are known for their “copious eloquence.” Many have written about their experience of the numinous, citing it as the basis of a profound belief in a future existence. Staunch rationalists dismiss these experiences. Freud, as one such, had a rational explanation for this numinous experience. In his book, Civilization and Its Discontents” (pp. 11-15) he refers to another work, in which he says he writes about the origins of religious thought. He sent the book to a friend and colleague for his review. His friend replied that it was a fine book but he wondered why Freud had failed to mention the most common source of religious feeling – the sense of awe engendered by the experience of “the other.” Freud said that while he himself had never had such an experience, it was readily explained in analytic terms. The new-born infant, said Freud, has no sense of self. Its entire world is experienced as other; all its care, feeding and sensations come from without. Gradually, the infant comes to have an appreciation of its own entity. The feeling of ‘other’ that we experience as adults is therefore nothing more than recollection of subconscious memories of that other infantile world. Freud’s colleague was correct in thinking that the experience of “the other” is a strong stimulus for religious feeling.

I believe that when I became a Mason, that in addition to the reasons I gave was an unarticulated expectation of something like a numinous experience, or some sort of milieu supporting the numinous side. After much more experience, reading and thought, I have come to have a better understanding of my expectation. I can't say for how many others that is true, but I suspect that it would be a significant number. It might be an interesting piece of research to explore the question. Masonry in its function as a rational system is intended to build moral character to prepare men for an afterlife that requires such preparation.

Men are attracted to Masonry by its brotherhood, charitable, purposes, good works, social events, the quality of its membership, and the like. These are all rational attributes which play a very important role in attracting appropriate candidates, but does the numinous aspect play a part in attracting and engaging members? I believe it to be a key factor, but one which has received little explicit attention. Perhaps it cannot be addressed didactically because of its nature, but I think its importance bears some exploration. The Hiram Legend offers a place to illustrate this possibility. The moral lesson in the legend is one of Integrity on the part of Hiram in keeping to the rule for conferring the masonic word. The legend illustrates one of the virtues inculcated by masonry's system of moral teachings.

The nonrational element is also involved in the Hiram story, if we consider the secret word in a metaphysical sense. Aristotle believed the proper end of a good life was the satisfaction of perfecting one's particular virtues and of living a rational, virtuous and moderate life. He has represented rational philosophy throughout history. Mystics,

however have for as long sought a connection with the nonrational, the numinous other. Many people have a mystical ear, not just the hermit in the wilderness, but ordinary people who have heard some whispering from the other.

Meister Eckhart, German Dominican mystic said, "There is a saying of the wise man, 'when all things lay in the midst of silence, then leapt there down into me from on high, from the royal throne, a secret word.'" (David O'Neal, ed. "Meister Eckhart, from Whom God Hid Nothing" p.45). Eckhart asked whether, "when this interior speaking occurs, should we actively "imagine and think about God or should (we) keep still in peace and quiet so that God an speak and act..." He seems to be anticipating Otto in distinguishing between a rational and a numinous response. Jesus told his followers that in order to enter heaven their righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees. This is an ironic statement, since the Pharisees are the epitome of righteousness. What Jesus means of course is that the legalistic righteousness of the Pharisees is inadequate and that a deeper source of morality is necessary; that as Meister Eckhart teaches, the soul must be ready to receive the spirit – the "word of God." The Hiram ritual is likewise more than a moral lesson. It tells us that not all of what we seek in masonry can be conferred. It can be received, but only when the individual has prepared himself, and his heart, mind and soul are in harmony and attuned to the creator. Then may the secret word be heard.

References

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