

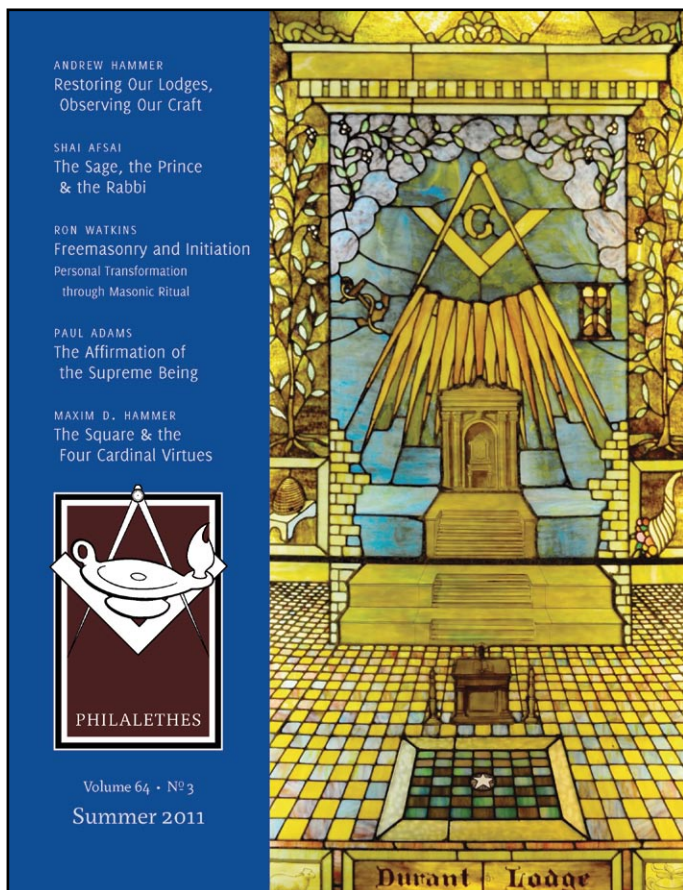


Sample Article from Volume 64 • N^o 3

PAUL ADAMS

The Affirmation of the Supreme Being

Fundamental to any regular conception of Craft Freemasonry is the candidate's affirmation of belief in the Supreme Being. Early Masons were so serious about this that—contrary to popular opinion—they even forbade Deists from joining. Freemasonry's general tolerance of religious differences is a characteristic that continues to be important today.



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by Peter J. Millheiser

The Affirmation of the Supreme Being

PAUL ADAMS CONSIDERS ONE OF THE ANCIENT LANDMARKS

From time immemorial, Masons have held the tradition that a belief in a Supreme Being is fundamental to membership. As Entered Apprentices, each one of us is asked—in the most solemn manner—in whom our ultimate trust is placed. This is a condition not only for our initial exposure to the mysteries of Freemasonry, but also for our ongoing participation in those privileges.

One of the best-known examples of this tradition comes from James Anderson in his *Constitutions of Free-Masons*: “A Mason is obliged, by his Tenure, to obey the moral Law; and if he rightly understands the Art, he will never be a stupid Atheist, nor an irreligious Libertine.”¹ The phrase “irreligious libertine” is usually understood to refer to freethinkers or Deists—those who taught that God might exist but who rejected all established religious rituals and holy writings. Deists generally believed that God could neither intervene in human affairs nor respond to worship. The early Masonic rejection of Deism was made more explicit in the first edition of the Antients’ *Ahiman Rezon*:

A Mason is obliged by his Tenure to believe firmly in the true Worship of the eternal God, as well as in all those sacred Records which the Dignitaries and Fathers

of the Church have compiled and published for the Use of all good Men: So that no one who rightly understands the Art, can possibly tread in the irreligious Paths of the unhappy Libertine, or be induced to follow the arrogant Professors of Atheism or Deism²

This regulation has much to teach us, if we are willing to take it at its word. It represents that the Craft’s exclusion of the unbeliever is connected to the right understanding of the Art. Even without taking the lessons of the Fellow Craft and Master Mason degrees into consideration, it is clear that this is true.

Consider the wording of the traditional invocation made over the candidate as the Apprentice degree begins. [See “Two Early Versions of the Initiation Prayer” on p. 122.—ED] The oldest version asks that the new Mason be endued with “a Competency of thy divine Wisdom, that he may, with the Secrets of Free-Masonry, be able to unfold the Mysteries of Godliness and Christianity.”³ Today, a nonsectarian version of this prayer is said, but the core idea is the same. The ritual’s stated aim is not something that makes sense from an atheist’s (or even a classical Deist’s) perspective. Expressing the idea in modern terms, Bro. W. Kirk MacNulty writes, “The Craft . . . acknowledges the primacy of God and envisions a psychological development in which the individual fulfils his potential in order best to serve the Divine Will.”⁴

This perspective is ritualistically illustrated in

Paul Adams MPS is the Worshipful Master of Oakland Durant Rockridge Lodge N^o 188 in Oakland, California.

TWO EARLY VERSIONS OF THE INITIATION PRAYER

Most holy and glorious Lord God, thou great Architect of Heaven and Earth, who art the Giver of all good Gifts and Graces, and hast promised that where two or three are gathered together in thy Name, thou wilt be in the Midst of them: In thy Name we assemble and meet together, most humbly beseeching thee to bless us in all our Undertakings, that we may know and serve thee aright, that all our Doings may tend to thy Glory and the Salvation of our Souls.

And we beseech thee, O Lord God, to bless this our present Undertaking, and grant that this our Brother may dedicate his Life to thy Service, and be a true and faithful Brother among us: Endue him with a Competency of thy divine Wisdom, that he may, with the Secrets of Free-Masonry, be able to unfold the Mysteries of Godliness and Christianity. This we humbly beg, in the Name, and for the Sake, of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

Laurence Dermott's *Ahiman Rezon*, 1756 (pp. 45–46)

The invocation spoken over the Apprentice candidate is derived from a traditional form that is likely to pre-date the distinction between the Antients and the Moderns. Originally it was overtly Christian. Preston's non-sectarian form (with variations) is used throughout English-language Masonry today.

Vouchsafe thy aid, Almighty Father and supreme governor of the world, on this our present convention; and grant that this candidate for masonry may dictate and devote his life to thy service, and become a true and faithful brother among us. Endue him with a competence of thy divine wisdom, that, by the secrets of this art, he may be better enabled to unfold the mysteries of godliness, to thy holy name. Amen.

William Preston's *Illustrations of Masonry*, 1772 (pp. 209–210)

the posture and language of the obligation. Were the holy writings nothing but foolish tales, and the references to God's assistance nothing but empty formalities, then the ceremony would become a mockery and obligation a lie.

"Freemasonry," wrote Robert Macoy, "accepts the idea of God, as a supreme fact, and bars its gates with inflexible sternness against those who deny his existence."⁵ This is nothing less than a landmark of our Craft. But sometimes, it can be misunderstood.

From time to time, for example, a brother (or potential applicant) may wrongly believe that it is necessary for a new Mason to share very specific (even sectarian) views of the Supreme Being in order to be admitted. While this would be contrary to the laws of most regular grand jurisdictions, this (unusually innocent, occasionally willful) misconception on the part of individuals can be destructive to the Craft.

Another issue we face today is that many of the young men coming to Freemasonry are not sure how to talk about their spiritual views. Some of them have experienced tremendous authority pressure in academic settings to profess atheism, or at least to conceal religious beliefs. A significant number of them, while wanting to believe in someone or

something, insist that they don't want to belong to an organized religion. In increasing numbers, they turn to Masonry. They sometimes say that they are "spiritual but not religious."

Things are no longer as simple as they used to be. When we act as sponsors and examiners, we should be aware of these cultural shifts and carefully listen to what our potential candidates are saying. Yes, there are some we must reject because they simply do not believe in a Supreme Being. But what in the past may have been a simple yes or no question, today may be a chance for a rich and memorable conversation.

Religious toleration is an essential Masonic trait, and one that we are justly proud of. Communicating that to our applicants is a great pleasure. It reassures many of them that they have found the right place. According to tradition, Solomon said, "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding." (Proverbs 3:5) If a new applicant comes to us expressing unfamiliar spiritual views, let us not simply "lean on our own understanding" of the divine. The Craft's insistence upon a belief in God is firm and unchangeable. Our respectful tolerance of one another's faiths must be just as firm.

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IN MEMORIAM

William Newton Wine FPS
August 7, 1949–March 25, 2011



Members of the Philalethes Society were sad to hear of the loss of W.: Bro.: William N. Wine on March 25, 2011. He passed away at his home in Concord, California.

As a young adult, Bro.: Bill joined the Order of DeMolay, and eventually became an enthusiastic Freemason. He was a Past Master of Diablo Valley Masonic Lodge N^o 448, and the Northern California Research Lodge. Bill was well-known as one of the moderators of the Freemasonry forum on CompuServe in the 1990s. He was made a Fellow of the Philalethes Society in 2001. Bill was installed as the Grand High Priest of the Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons in California in 2005. He was also an active member of the Societas Rosicruciana in Civitatibus Fœderatis and the Allied Masonic Degrees. Masons in California and around the world mourn his passing.

THE SAGE, THE PRINCE & THE RABBI

continued from page 109

32. David T. Morgan, "Benjamin Franklin: Champion of Generic Religion," *The Historian* 62:4 (June 2000), 723.
33. Morgan, "Benjamin Franklin," 728.
34. Ibid.
35. Morgan, "Benjamin Franklin," 729.
36. Morgan, "Benjamin Franklin," 723.
37. Franklin, *The Autobiography*, 100. Gross addresses this section and its non-sectarian nature in "Benjamin Franklin and Jewish Ethics," 111–12.
38. In *Out of the Shtetl* (141), Sinkoff writes: "Franklin's commitment to the principles of natural religion and his avowed ecumenicism, both of which he affirmed in his memoirs, made his work palatable for Lefin, who would have been suspicious of any overtly Christian undertones." See also Sinkoff, "Benjamin Franklin in Jewish Eastern Europe," 151. As for Franklin's thirteenth moral virtue, humility, for which he counsels imitating Jesus and Socrates, the very fact that Franklin equates the two is telling of his approach to Christianity.

AFFIRMATION OF THE SUPREME BEING

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NOTES

1. James Anderson, *Constitutions of the Free-Masons* (London: William Hunter, 1723), 50.
2. Laurence Dermott, *Ahiman Rezon, or A Help to a Brother* (London: James Bedford, 1756), 14. Dermott's language here is copied nearly verbatim from Fifield D'Assigny's 1744 *Serious and Impartial Enquiry* (24). An earlier work by D'Assigny glorifies the Craft poetically: "Then may we justly term Thee thrice Honourable, thrice Mysterious MASONRY . . . Thou hast made Man to regard his CREATOR, with a due Reverence, and religious Awe, neither to suffer himself to be carried away with blind Superstition, or to be hurried on to follow the arrogant Professors of ATHEISM or DEISM." See *An Impartial Answer to the Enemies of Free-Masonry* (Dublin: E. Waters, 1741).
3. Dermott, *Ahiman Rezon*, 46.
4. W. Kirk MacNulty, *The Way of the Craftsman: A Search for the Spiritual Essence of Craft Freemasonry* (London: Central Regalia, 2002), 21.
5. Robert Macoy, *An Illustrated History and Cyclopædia of Freemasonry* (New York: Macoy Publishing, 1908), 156.

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