

Difficult Questions About Freemasonry

by Roger Firestone

Is Freemasonry a religion?

No, Freemasonry is not a religion. Masons who treat it as such are mistaken. Freemasonry strongly encourages its members to belong to an established religion, although that is not a requirement for membership (only that a candidate profess a belief in a Supreme Being). Masonry is a fraternal organization that encourages morality and charity and studies philosophy. It has no clergy, no sacraments, and does not promise salvation to its members.

But what about terms like "Temple," "Worshipful," and so on?

Labor unions meet in a Labor Temple. A museum may be called the Temple of Fine Arts. This does not mean that they are religious institutions. The same is true of Freemasonry. (Masonic buildings are also called Lodge Halls and Masonic Centers as well as Masonic Temples. Some Scottish Rite buildings are called "Cathedrals," but that is from a Greek word meaning "chair," and referring to the seat of authority of any sort.)

The term "worshipful" stems from 18th century English usage, when Freemasonry in its present form was being organized. The term has nothing to do with religious worship but is an old synonym for "honorable" or "respected." Check any good dictionary! Similarly, Freemasons engage in group prayer and have a chaplain, just as do the armed services and the houses of Congress. That does not make Masonry into a religion.

Is there a conflict between Freemasonry and established religion?

There is nothing in Freemasonry that conflicts with most religions. However, Freemasonry does insist on religious tolerance. To the extent that certain religious groups would wish to suppress other religions or persecute their followers, Freemasons would be in opposition to such activities, and adherents of such groups would be both uncomfortable and unwelcome in Masonry. It is also the case that certain religious groups are misinformed about Freemasonry and believe things about the Fraternity that are not true; basing their opinions on this false information, they then formulate opinions that create conflict.

Is Freemasonry a cult?

That depends on what is meant by "cult." By some definitions, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism are cults. By another definition, golfing, bowling, and surfing the Internet are cults. But in the usual use of the term, referring to a group that separates itself from society and its members from their non-member friends, demands slavish obedience from its adherents, engages in brainwashing techniques, confiscates their resources, and sees itself in opposition to established society, absolutely not!

Quite the opposite, in fact: Masonry does not recruit members, does not compel attendance at any of its meetings, charges modest dues and fees (some little changed from sixty years ago, when the dollar was worth a lot more), encourages community service and participation in civic and religious organizations, and allows any member to quit (demit) at any time (providing he has no outstanding financial obligations; otherwise, he is liable to be suspended, but in either case, he would no longer be a member). It is easier to get out of Masonry than it is to get into it!

Why do certain fundamentalist groups oppose Freemasonry?

Mostly out of ignorance and misinformation, although possibly out of fear of competition for time and attention with the church (churches have been suffering the same loss of active membership over the past few decades as has Freemasonry). Ignorance of Masonry allows misinformation to spread. For example, it is claimed that Freemasonry has a "plan of salvation" that is in opposition to that of the Christian Church. Simply not true; nothing in any of the Masonic degrees refers to salvation.

Is there no Masonic theology, then?

An examination of the the degrees will reveal that there is a basic theology of Masonry, as follows:

There is a Supreme Being
Who created the Universe,

Who has established and revealed a moral law,
And to Whom we must give account
in a life after this.

These five points are supported by material in the lectures and related contents of the degrees, such as the discourses on the Working Tools. But there is nothing in these points that is in conflict with any major religion of the Western world. (To be sure, there are branches of Buddhism that are non-theistic, and there are those who do not believe in an afterlife, but they need not become Freemasons, nor does Masonry seek to dissuade them from their beliefs.)

What about allegations that Freemasonry is Satanic or pagan?

Most of these are complete fabrications; the rest are misunderstandings of the institution and its rituals. A number of forgeries and alleged exposes of Masonry were created during the last century. Most of the claims of "Satanism" in Masonry can be traced to one or two of these fraudulent sources. Other such allegations are simply made-up claims about what various Masonic emblems and symbols stand for.

For example, it is sometimes claimed that the letter "G" found in the Master Mason's jewel, along with the Square and Compasses, is a substitute for a phallic symbol. But there is nothing in Masonry to support such a statement; it is complete fiction. The letter "G" stands for God (it is used by Masons who speak other languages due to the modern origins of Masonry in English-speaking countries); in the Scottish Rite, the Hebrew letter yodh, which is the first letter of the Tetragrammaton, or Ineffable Name, plays the same role.

Another example that came up recently was a discussion of the Blazing Star. This is one of the "ornaments" of a Lodge, introduced in the Entered Apprentice degree. A non-Mason insisted that

- * Masons "worship" the Blazing Star
- * the Blazing Star is somehow to be identified with Lucifer (based on the verse Isaiah 14:12)
- * the Blazing Star is the "false dawn" that can then be identified with a false light
(in competition with the true Light of Jesus)
- * and that therefore Masons engage in devil worship.

Here are the facts:

* Isaiah 14 is a chapter with a prophecy against the kings of Babylon, specifically Nebuchadnezzar. The quoted verse is rendered, in my Bible, "Day-star, son of the morning, how hast thou fallen?" In this passage, the prophet alleges that the arrogant king of Babylon has thought himself as glorious as a celestial body, but that the destruction of the kingdom of Babylon shall surely bring him back to earth. The word here translated as "day-star" is, in Hebrew, "heyleyl," and refers to the planet Venus. The ancient Greeks and Romans both used different words for this planet when it appeared in the morning sky from its appearance in the evening sky. The Greeks called it Hesperus in the evening and Phosphorus in the morning; the Romans called it Venus in the evening and Lucifer in the morning. Hence, the translation of the Hebrew, via Greek, into Latin (i.e. from the Hebrew to the Septuagint to the Vulgate), naturally would introduce the word "Lucifer" as the correct Latin translation of the Hebrew.

* The term "Lucifer" as a name for the Devil or Satan, cannot be traced any farther back than the Middle Ages, and was only widely popularized by Milton's epic poem, "Paradise Lost."

* The Minnesota Masonic Manual (as one source on the lectures of Masonry) clearly identifies the Blazing Star as emblematic of the Star of Bethlehem, hardly a "Satanic" reference. It has nothing to do with the planet Venus.

* The Blazing Star is mentioned for about 30 seconds in a lecture some 20-30 minutes in length (it depends on jurisdiction) in the first degree of Masonry only, an amount of attention that could scarcely be described as "worship."

* The "false dawn" is not heralded by Venus, but is a phenomenon produced by the Zodiacal Light, a band of dust lying in the plane of the Earth's orbit, which most prominently appears as a skyglow before sunrise in the fall (the false dawn) and after sunset in the spring, but can only be observed under ideally dark conditions.

In other words, the allegation about Masonry in this case combines many errors: Taking a portion of a single verse of the Bible out of context, misinterpreting its translation, misunderstanding an astronomical term, misidentifying a Masonic emblem with an astronomical object, and mischaracterizing the importance of a symbol in the ritual. Perhaps all of this can be attributed to ignorance, but since the facts are easy to obtain, one is forced to wonder about how such allegations come to be and to persist.

Assertions about "pagan" material in Masonry may stem from the study of material from the ancient world in some of the degrees. But this is not paganism (the worship of idols, natural objects, or polytheistic human-like deities). In fact, many of the early teachings of the Church depended heavily on the works of such "pagan" philosophers as Plato and Aristotle; Christianity has absorbed such pagan elements as the Christmas tree, the name Easter (from a pagan fertility goddess), and the actual date of Christmas (pre-empting the Roman's pagan winter solstice festival of the Saturnalia). Indeed, the mythos about the fall of Lucifer from heaven to the underworld is of pagan origin, derived from the Graeco-Roman legend of Hephaestus (Vulcan) who fell from Mt. Olympus to the nether regions, where his forges were located, and in ancient art is depicted as lame from the fall. There have been many thinkers and learned men in cultures other than that of the West in the Judaeo-Christian era, and it is not "paganism" to study them.

If Masonry is so aboveboard, why is it "secret?"

There are fewer secrets to Freemasonry than most non-members imagine; even many Masons are not entirely clear on what is and is not secret in Masonry. The moral principles of Masonry are the same as those taught you in Sunday school or at your mother's knee (sometimes over it!); it is only the exact procedures and words by which those principles are taught in Masonry that are secret, for it is the knowledge of those that distinguishes a Mason from those who are not members. To be entitled to the fellowship peculiar to the Lodge, a Mason must be able to identify himself, and these secrets provide the means for doing so.

A better term than "secrecy" would be privacy. Masonry is not a public organization like a school board or a city council. It is an association of private citizens, just like a country club or a church. No one who is not a member has a right to know about the internal workings of any of these things. They are private to the group, not "secret."

What about "blood oaths" and hideous penalties of the degrees?

It is true that Masons must take solemn obligations to be faithful to the principles of Masonry, and their very nature and seriousness implies that there should be penalties. However, the language of these obligations makes it clear that the penalties are not actually inflicted by the Lodge or any body of Masonry but are expressions of how disgraced and contemptible one should feel for violating such an obligation. In some jurisdictions, the candidate is told that the penalties are of "ancient origin and symbolic only." Later degrees make this even more apparent, even if the actual information is not specifically addressed to the candidate. But the true penalties for violation of the laws of Masonry are three only: Admonition (or reprimand), suspension, or expulsion. Stories about Masons being maimed or murdered for violation of their oaths are just that: fiction. Not one single instance can be documented, despite the many attempts by the enemies of Masonry to promote this slander.

Masons say one thing, anti-Masons say another -- whom should I believe?

The history of Freemasonry is well documented, and its major players include a vast number of contributors to society--men such as Washington, Truman, and Churchill in politics, Goethe, Schiller, and Conan Doyle in literature, Burl Ives, Ernest Borgnine, Gene Autry in the performing arts, Mozart, Haydn, and Irving Berlin in music, and on and on. Freemasons played essential roles in the civilization of the New World, taming the west (Kit Carson was a Freemason), freeing Latin America (Bolivar was a Mason, as was Bernardo O'Higgins), and so on. Freemasons have established a vast array of charitable activities, primarily focussing on the health field, such as the famous Shriners' Children's Hospitals for treatment of orthopedic problems and burns, the Scottish Rite speech disorder clinics, the Masonic cancer centers, the Tall Cedars' activities for muscular dystrophy, and many others. Not to mention homes for the aged and even dormitory accommodations at the University of Texas.

Among the anti-Masons, one can count a single president of the US, John Quincy Adams (thirteen presidents were Masons), two literary figures (Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Dickens--and it is not clear whether Dickens was really an anti-Mason, or one who simply felt that the Masons of his time were not living up to their standards and were therefore hypocrites), and almost no one else of any consequence in history or who has made a significant contribution to the humanities. The anti-Masons operate no charitable groups but engage in fund-raising only to support themselves: They sell books for profit, seek donations to keep their "ministries" operating on television, and contribute nothing to society at large.

All of this is a matter of public record; these facts do not depend on one's ability to determine who is telling the truth. Further, we have the experience of history to teach us what to believe of a group of "anti-" somethings, whether they are anti-Semites, anti-Catholics, or anti-Masons. That historical experience has shown that those who single out a group, especially one different from the majority in society, for opprobrium and hatred are generally not telling the truth about that

group, but are seeking to benefit themselves from stirring up the passions of the mob.

In other words, if we knew nothing of the Masons nor of the anti-Masons, it would be difficult to know whom to believe. But we are not so ignorant as that. There are plenty of epistemological reasons to choose to believe that Masons are telling the truth in the present context, as opposed to accepting the word of the anti-Masons. (E.g., one epistemological principle is known as Occam's Razor--it tells us to accept the simplest hypothesis that explains the known facts. The anti-Masons, when confronted with their own contradictions, pile on ever more assumptions. Prove that "Lucifer" is not mentioned in the Symbolic Rite of the first three degrees and they will assert that it is the Scottish Rite that teaches "devil worship." Prove that there is no such thing in the 32 degrees, and they will claim it is taught in the 33rd degree. A denial by a 33rd degree Mason will lead to the attribution of Satanism to the Knights Templar. And so on. The simpler hypothesis is that there is no such Satanic nonsense in Freemasonry--given the conflict of assertions, Occam's Razor directs us to this choice.) The anti-Masons also engage in circular reasoning: They claim that there is a great "Masonic conspiracy" to control the world. Absent any evidence of that, they claim that the very lack of evidence is "proof" of the power of the conspiracy. (Too many Oliver Stone movies? Of course, even Congressmen have engaged in such reasoning, as in the case of the "October surprise" investigation, when Tom Foley suggested that the very lack of evidence was what justified a Congressional hearing. An inability to reason against one's own prejudices is not unique to the anti-Masons.)

Anti-Masons, in discussing some of the more inflammatory allegations about Masonry, such as the worship of satanic or pagan gods, also assert that the vast majority of Masons are totally ignorant of the "real" nature of Masonry, which is revealed only to a few "high" Masons. Yet these anti-Masons insist that they themselves know these hidden secrets better than most of the millions of active members of the Masonic fraternity. Is this a credible state of affairs? In other words, there are very good reasons to believe that Masons, rather than anti-Masons are telling the truth about the Fraternity, based on the history of Freemasonry, the known character of those who have been Freemasons, and the principles of epistemology. Of course, if one is ignorant of the history and background of a witness, as well as ignorant of the theory of knowledge, one is at the mercy of every smooth-talking mountebank and charlatan to come along. (Why do you think that criminal defense lawyers seek the most uninformed jurors possible?)

A recent (Mon Aug 9 1999) update: In addition to spreading false stories about the nature and intentions of Freemasonry in print media, television and radio programs, and Internet venues, the past few months have seen an escalation of anti-Masonic activity of an active nature on the Internet. Anti-Masons have engaged in several forms of Net abuse, including multiple repeated postings to Usenet of the same material (a dozen or more times), postings to large numbers of Usenet newsgroups, and combinations of these. Within the past week or so, one anti-Mason in Australia with administrator privileges has begun issuing *CANCEL* requests for postings by Freemasons to alt.freemasonry and replacing those messages with forgeries of the originals containing obscenities, incoherencies, and so on. Examination of the full message headers reveals these posts to have originated at telstra.net, near Canberra, and not with the ISPs of the reputed senders. Since anti-Masons uniformly use anonymous posting methods and never appear under their own names or identities, closing down their accounts takes time.

The evidence of those actions can be found at what used to be known as Deja News. Anti-Masons frequently allege that Masons are part of some worldwide criminal conspiracy; when they are caught doing the same, what does it mean for the credibility of their accusations? And why would anyone take the word of a source or group of sources that choose to be anonymous.

No, the matter of whom to believe is not one which requires hard thought to resolve.

Why Can't Christians Pray in Lodge?

Of course Christians can pray in Lodge! What they may not do is offer a specifically Christian prayer as Lodge prayer, any more than a Jew or Muslim may offer a prayer specific to his religion.

The reason for this is that it is the custom of Masonry to require all to participate in and assent to Lodge prayer. How can it be proper for a Christian to require non-Christians to assent to a prayer peculiar to his own religious belief? No Christian would assent to a prayer offered by a Jew or Muslim which essentially denied the doctrine of the Trinity. Because a Lodge acts in unison, prayers offered in Lodge must be of a nature that will be agreed to by all present.

To be sure, some Christians believe that only prayers given in a particularly Christian form are truly prayers. These people cannot become Freemasons because they do not subscribe to the principles of religious toleration required of Masons. But most Christians do not hold these exclusive beliefs and have no objections to the form of prayer offered in the Masonic Lodge.

Is Freemasonry anti-Catholic?

No. Masonry has no objection to the admission of a Catholic to the Masonic fraternity. Whether the Roman Catholic Church objects to a Catholic becoming a Freemason is their business, not ours. Masonry would not counsel anyone to do something opposed by his religion. The present position of the Church regarding Freemasonry is not altogether clear; some sources indicate that the Vatican remains opposed to any form of Freemasonry, others say that only those organizations which "plot against the Church" (which Masonry does not) are proscribed, and others see no problem. This is a matter for any individual Catholic who might be interested in joining the Masons and his spiritual advisor.

There is material in some of the degrees of the appendant bodies of Freemasonry which might be interpreted as anti-Catholic, particularly with reference to the history of the Knights Templar and the death of Jacques DeMolay. But those events occurred nearly 700 years ago! The Church of today is not the Church of the 14th century. The Church itself has recognized that leaders of those times made errors of various sorts; one need only look to the 20th century canonization of Joan of Arc, burned in the 15th century as a heretic, or the rehabilitation of Galileo, forced in the 17th century to recant his scientific studies, to recognize this. The degrees of Masonry make no mention of the Church in any other than remote historical context.

Freemasonry is the enemy of tyranny and despotism, not of any particular religion or nationality. If the Church were to fall into the hands of the heartless and rapacious, as it did in earlier times (the days of the Borgias and the Medicis, not to mention Torquemada), it would be as much the duty of every Catholic to denounce such behavior as it would be for Freemasons--and modern-day Martin Luthers.

What is the role of various doctrinal books, like Pike's Morals and Dogma?

Actually, there are no "doctrinal" books in Freemasonry. Freemasonry is a society dedicated to free thinking and freedom of all kinds. No Mason has the right to dictate to another what he shall or shall not believe regarding his religion, his politics, or even his interpretation of the Masonic symbols. There are a number of conventional interpretations of the symbols of Freemasonry, some of which are given in the lectures of the degrees, but no Mason is required to accept any or all of them; he is free to explore the world of thought and make up his own mind.

Anti-Masons are fond of combing through Albert Pike's Morals and Dogma to find various passages that somehow "expose" the "secrets" of Freemasonry's dangerous beliefs. They conveniently ignore a number of facts:

1. The preface of Morals and Dogma makes it clear that Pike's work is an unannotated anthology, containing a portion of his own writing and also the works of many philosophers and theologians dating back to antiquity. Much of the book is derived from sources far removed from Freemasonry in time.
2. The preface also makes clear that no one is required to believe or accept any of the contents as truth. No "doctrinal" book would announce that every reader is "free to dissent" from any of its contents.
3. Morals and Dogma was first of all written for those who have received the degrees of Scottish Rite Freemasonry in the form developed and edited by Albert Pike (the "Pike recension"). For someone to attempt to interpret the contents without the knowledge of the degrees is like trying to understand a book on quantum physics without having mastered the basics of dynamics and statics.
4. Morals and Dogma was written under the authority of the Supreme Council, 33rd Degree, for the Southern Jurisdiction of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry in the USA. The SJ of the USA, AASR, encompasses only a minority of Masons in the US and an even smaller proportion worldwide. Outside of the SJ of the US, Albert Pike is of much less influence than many non-Masons (and certainly anti-Masons) suppose. (The same is true of later works which also elucidate the degrees of the SJ of the US, such as Clausen's Commentaries and Hutchens' A Bridge to Light.)

Similarly, anti-Masons like to quote (out of context, quite often) Manly Hall (who wrote many of his books before becoming a Freemason), Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia, Albert Mackey, and others. Many of these men did their writing a century or more ago and use an idiom not well understood by those living today who are not familiar with such writing styles. These books are useful reference sources for those who seek to improve their knowledge of Masonry and who wish to sharpen their wits against the whetstone of great thinkers, but they are not doctrine.

I've read the ritual in an exposé; what is all this strange stuff?

Remember that Masons solemnly pledge to keep the ritual secret. An "exposé" is the product of someone who has broken a promise to his friends and neighbors and to God. Can you really trust that such a person is telling you the truth? Masonry must be experienced to be understood; reading the ritual does not truly confer the lessons of the degrees, even for those of us who have the real ritual (and not some "exposé"). Masonry is a way of life that involves much more than the ceremonies of the degrees. Knowing a password or secret handshake is not what makes a man a Mason. The essence of Masonry is not something that can be written down.

Is Masonry some kind of global conspiracy?

The simplest answer is "no." But that is not a very satisfying answer for those who have heard many preposterous rumors about Masonry, the "New World Order," the Bavarian Illuminati, and so on. Let's look at some of the issues that have been raised:

Global Organization

There is no single governing body of Freemasonry in the world. The United Grand Lodge of England (UGLE) is the descendant of the first Grand Lodge formed in 1717, but that gives it no authority over other Grand Lodges, all of which are equal. The UGLE does not even have total authority in Great Britain, for Scotland has its own Grand Lodge.

The Supreme Council of the Ancient And Accepted Scottish Rite for the Southern Jurisdiction of the USA, sometimes is called the Mother Supreme Council of the World, for it was the first to be formed, but again, all Supreme Councils are equal, and chronological primacy confers no special authority. The Southern Jurisdiction of the AASR does not even have complete authority in the USA, for there is also a Supreme Council for the Northern Jurisdiction, comprising the states east of the Mississippi and north of the Ohio River and Mason-Dixon Line.

There are the General Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons International and the General Grand Council of Cryptic Masons International. But these bodies have mostly ceremonial impact; no Grand Chapter or Grand Council is required to belong to its General Grand counterpart, and many Grand Chapters/Councils do not.

Finally, the top authority in Masonry is always the Grand Master of Masons, not some Grand Commander or other personage associated with the "higher" degrees. The Grand Master of Masons can suspend the General Grand High Priest from all the privileges of Masonry; the GGHP has no such power. Obviously, there is no global organization in Masonry.

Conspiracy

The most bizarre thing about conspiracy theories in general is that there is never a clear explanation of what the conspiracy is about, nor how it is carrying out its aims. The alleged Masonic conspiracy stories conform to this. None of the conspiracy theorists ever explains what it is that the Masons want to do with their supposed power.

Since Masonry's tenets are brotherly love, relief, and truth, if the Masons did run the world, it might be a better place.

Many of the Founding Fathers who wrote the Constitution of the United States were Freemasons; the principles in that document have stood the test of over two centuries. Would a Masonic government be so bad? Look at the governments founded by anti-Masonic groups: Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, Iran under totalitarian religious rule. Where is the real problem in the world?

Bavarian Illuminati

This group died out in the 18th century. An organization that does not exist is a convenient scapegoat! To the conspiracy loony, that there is no evidence of a group's existence is "proof" that it is fiendishly clever in concealing itself. One does not have to be a professor of philosophy to see that this kind of logic makes no sense in a search for truth.

Masonic symbols on the dollar bill

Some commentators have claimed that there are Masonic symbols on the US \$1 bill, and that they were put there by the Masonic president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt to show that the country had been taken over by Masons.

Well, perhaps the symbols are Masonic, but the material on the dollar bill dates from the late 1700s, not Roosevelt's term. The two circled objects on the back of the bill are the two sides of the Great Seal of the United States. It is said that Ben Franklin, a Mason, had some influence in the design.

The Masonic symbols

The representation of an eye and an unfinished pyramid. The All-Seeing Eye of Deity is certainly mentioned in Freema-

sorry, but that concept dates back to the Bible, at least. An unfinished pyramid symbolizes that the work of nation building is not completed, but the pyramid is not a particularly Masonic symbol; any unfinished building would have done. (Some say that there is an owl in the engravings in one corner of the bill, but that is a product of an overactive imagination. The owl is also not a Masonic symbol; the only birds that come to mind in any of the degrees are the pelican in the 18th degree [a symbol of Jesus, incidentally], the mythical phoenix, and the eagle. And those are found only in the Scottish Rite, so they are not characteristic of Masonry as a whole.

New World Order

Ever since George Bush (not a Freemason) publicized this term, it has been an obsession of certain groups. They point to the wording on the dollar bill (see above), which reads "novus ordo seclorum." Unfortunately, as someone once said, "Th[eir] Latin waxeth rusty." The phrase on the bill means "a new order of the ages," and refers to the completely novel (and still unique) form of American government, a republic of separated powers, composed of a federal union of states, in which the central government is granted powers by the people, whose rights are supreme over the institutions of government. If the term were to mean "new world order," the third word would have to be "sæculorum" instead.

The Kennedy Assassination (and others)

Much has been made of the facts that many members of the Warren Commission were Freemasons. Supposedly, this allowed them to "cover up" the "evidence" that the Freemasons had Kennedy assassinated. Of course, there is no explanation of how the Freemasons might have benefited from Kennedy's death or what other motivation they might have had for such a plot. For most of the history of the American Republic, about one-third of American officeholders--presidents, senators, judges, congressmen, local officials--have been Freemasons. It is hardly surprising that a group such as the Warren Commission would have been about 1/3 Freemasons.

As for other sensational assassinations, there is the same question to be asked: How could the Freemasons have benefitted from this act? As there is never a sensible answer, the allegations are clearly laughable.

Since the Freemasons have been around for nearly 300 years and have held many responsible positions in the American government, as well as in other countries around the world, particularly the English-speaking ones, if there were any such conspiracy, it would have long since succeeded in its aims. As the concept is the product of overwrought imaginations, the total lack of evidence or purpose for any such conspiracy must lead us to dismiss it as nonsense.

You said that Masonry was not a religion and had no priests, but you just mentioned a Grand High Priest--what gives?

At the time of the return from the Babylonian exile, some of the legendary events of which are commemorated by the Royal Arch Degree, Jeshua, Zerubbabel, and Haggai were the High Priest, King, and Scribe among the Israelites. The important roles played by these individuals led to their positions being used to designate the three principal officers of the Royal Arch Chapter. The title "High Priest" is used by the presiding officer of a Royal Arch Chapter in the United States of America. In other countries, the title King is assigned to the presiding officer, and the High Priest is a subordinate officer; anti-monarchist sentiment in the US at the time the Royal Arch degrees were becoming established in America (late 1700s) led to the primary role being assigned to the High Priest, which was also consonant with the American notion of the state being subordinate to the Deity. In some foreign jurisdictions, the designations of the first three officers are simply First, Second, and Third Principal, with no reference to the historical roles of the individuals commemorated in the degree ceremonies.

The High Priest of a Royal Arch Chapter (and likewise the Grand High Priest of a Grand Chapter and the General Grand High Priest of the General Grand Chapter) performs no sacerdotal functions; his office is the equivalent of those of Worshipful Master of a Lodge, Illustrious Master of a Council, Eminent Commander of a Commandery, and so on. Like all Masonic bodies, a Royal Arch Chapter has a Chaplain (in Scottish Rite Masonry, the office is termed "Prelate") who is responsible for offering prayer at the opening of a meeting. The Excellent High Priest is responsible for administration of his Chapter's business and conduct of its ritual.

Though it has Commanders, Masonry has no army; though it has officers titled "High Priest," Masonry is not a religion. The High Priest is not a priest, paradoxical as that may sound; he is a chairman or president in fact, if not in name.

Why do Masons want to hoodwink people?

This is a misunderstanding arising from the use of archaic language in Masonry when modern meanings are different from

what they were a couple of centuries ago. (E.g., "let" used to mean "hinder"--which it still does in tennis, but for most usages, it means the exact opposite: to allow or permit.)

"Hoodwink" comes from two words, "hood" (meaning to cover, when used as a verb) and "wink" (an archaic term for the eye). Thus, "to hoodwink" means to cover the eyes, originally. At the time when this word was adopted by Freemasonry (the early 18th century or before), this was its primary meaning.

Since that time, it has come to be synonymous with the phrase "pull the wool over the eyes," which is to say "to deceive." The word, however, is just as often used as a noun in Masonry as a verb, and when used as a verb is accompanied by the action of using a blindfold (the modern term for a hoodwink), making its meaning clear at the time.

The word "hoodwink" has only one meaning in a Masonic context, and that is "blindfold." It is only anti-Masons who hope to deceive others (should I have said "hoodwink others?") who claim, dishonestly, that Masons use the term "hoodwink" with the meaning of "deception."

Why do Masons insult non-Masons as being profane?

Again, this is a misunderstanding over the use of archaic language. The word "profane" comes from two Latin words, "pro," meaning "before," and "fanum," meaning "temple." In earlier usage, "profane" had a more literal meaning of "outside the temple." It was simply an antonym for the term "sacred," just as "secular" still is. (Classical music lovers will note, for example, the Debussy work, "Danses sacrees et profanes," as a use of the same word in French with this meaning.) In more recent usage, dating from well after the language of Masonry became fixed, the term "profane" was most often coupled with the term "language," to denote speech which would not have been uttered inside a temple or other sacred precincts. Gradually, this became the most common application of "profane" and, in the popular mind, became its only meaning. "Profane" became a synonym for swearing, cursing, and blasphemy, all of which are now called "profanity." But when a Mason refers to "profanes" or the "profane" world, he means only those who are not initiated into Masonry and thus must remain "outside the temple." Nothing more; no insult is intended.