

# CIVILITY IN AN UNCIVIL AGE

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## WHAT CAN AND SHOULD FREEMASONS DO ABOUT IT?

BY MARGARET C. JACOB

Imagine stepping into the lobby of a chic London theater, dressed to the nines. You might suppose you'd find your fellow theater-goers similarly decked out, equally prepared for an evening of refinement and culture. When the lights dimmed and the curtain rose, you would hope – no, you would expect – that this audience would follow the plot with interest, and applaud at the appropriate moments. During intermission, you imagine, you might all retire to the lobby for a refreshment and gracious discussion.

These expectations, reasonable enough today, are a far cry from the reality of 18th-century London. In that time and place, common behavior at the theater ranged from loud gossiping over the actors, mimicking of performances out on the floor, violent rioting, and, on particularly spirited evenings, a communal trashing of the theater. Petty theft, drunken brawls, and prostitution were regular affairs.

Amid all that rabble-rousing, there was one force of quiet composure. Enter the Freemasons: model theater patrons, exemplars of etiquette, pillars of civility. In 18th-century London, some Masonic lodges paraded through the streets together to the theater, where they made an example of watching in polite stillness. Eventually, others followed suit. With time, their silent example made a difference. The question is: Would it today?

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## COURIERS OF CIVILITY

Inside of theaters and out, ample evidence suggests that, beginning in the 18th century, Freemasonry acted as a civilizing influence in both Western Europe and the American colonies.

In multiple orations, in every European language, we can find Masonic brothers praising the order for its practice of friendship and mutual respect. An orator in Paris during the 1780s told his brothers, “The hearts of Masons touch one another everywhere at every point.... The happiness of one is necessarily the happiness of all.” French Freemasons of the time provided cash to brothers or their widows who had been caught in distress or poverty. They asked members who were doctors to assist other ill brothers and to do so without a fee. Dutch and Belgian lodges had similar funds.

Eighteenth-century Masonic orators declared that “every lodge is a democracy.” British orators proclaimed, “We wish to unite all men of an agreeable humour and enlightened understanding,” and furthermore, “All men are by nature brethren, so consequently all men are by nature equal.” Dutch Freemasons saw the entire world as a republic; each nation as a family; every individual as a son.

In its first century of existence, this Masonic idealism about society and humankind was infectious. In The Hague, the constitution book of a lodge for men and women proclaimed, “The brothers and sisters [will deport themselves] without vice, in order to augment the good manners of society.” Whether they were combating the inequities of the financial market or the rudeness of theater-goers, it seemed that Masons hoped to make up for the failings of society.

## THE PATH OF GREAT DISCRETION

Yet brothers also sought to hold the world at bay. There is a tension, rooted in history, between Masonic ideals and a fear of notoriety in the public gaze. Early brothers regularly referred to non-Masons as “the profane.” Especially in Catholic Europe, Freemasons kept a low profile while working to assist brothers, orphans, and the indigent.

In the English-speaking world, lodges followed the lead of the United Grand Lodge of England (UGLE), which in turn followed the lead of king and court. During the early decades of the 20th century through the end of World War II, the UGLE opted not to be seen or heard. Britain was not without its anti-Masonic, anti-Semitic fringe, and discretion was useful in avoiding vicious public attacks. But first and foremost the UGLE was imitating the practices of king and aristocracy: The less said, the better.

This policy had one fatal flaw: The UGLE did not work to counter hostilities or conspiracy theories, or even to clarify common misunderstandings. The habit of discretion, which still holds among the upper classes in Britain, continues to dominate official Masonic responses. Since the 1950s, a careless form of British journalism has been on the rise; witness the phone-hacking behavior of the now defunct News of the World. Over the last 30 years, one consequence has been a flood of public attention to the fraternity, a fair bit of it negative in tone or content. In January of this year the British newspaper The Independent opened an article on Freemasonry and the police with the following: “Secret networks of Freemasons have been used by organized crime gangs to corrupt the criminal justice system, according to a bombshell Metropolitan Police report leaked to The Independent.” The response of the UGLE? No comment.

Freemasonry is still a part of civil society, but it may have become an odd, cautious part. Lodges deliberately avoid politics and religion. They usually do not insert themselves in

public discussions. But does that render them ineffective when, or if, they participate in the public sphere?

## **INCIVILITY IN THE REPUBLIC, AND THE ROLE OF MODERN MASONS**

At its 18th-century origins, Freemasonry proclaimed values very much derived from what may be described as “classical republicanism.” Masonic orators invoked the Roman republic as an ancient example: Virtue lay at the heart of an ethical society, one that eschewed mindless luxury, greed, and self-interest. Lodges on either side of the Atlantic – and the Channel – talked about moral regeneration, about how patriots would obey the laws and still work to reform society and government. Clearly, those ideals worked best in actual republics, such as were created in the late 18th century.

What about today? Republicanism, in its modern form, is still central to the Masonic legacy. It is not about left or right, liberal or conservative, white or black, male or female. It is about virtuous behavior appropriate to citizens of a republic.

In this line of thinking, *incivility* is the antithesis of republican virtue, precisely because it actually works to stifle freedom of expression. And society’s current issue of incivility is in our public discourse, particularly with regard to politics and race. Certainly we can see this happening around us – our endless entertainment news cycles fan the fires of partisanship, and anonymous online forums have made spiteful public comment easier and more bold. Staying silent may sometimes seem to be the only reasonable way forward. But it begs the question: Do we as Americans understand how to have civil public conversations about difficult and emotional subjects that can deepen our understanding of one another?

American grand lodges have remained, for the most part, just as silent as their British counterpart. If the fraternity is to combat incivility, it may need to move out of its comfort zone of discretion. Look at the rules of civil behavior, spoken or tacit, that characterize any lodge meeting. Could these be codified and taught to anyone of good will? There are specific forms of behavior that brothers seek to avoid. Could these be enumerated and presented to audiences interested in Freemasonry, who would learn in the process about civility? In Italian male and female Freemasonry, there is a widespread custom of remaining silent during one’s first year of membership. Is there some comparable practice in American lodges that might serve to make people stop and think before speaking? Lodges have considerable experience with philanthropy, especially in the area of health care. Could they bring any recommendations to hospital professionals? Despite American Freemasonry’s tortured history of race relations, enormous strides have been made to bring white and black brothers together. How did lodges do this: What principles guided the integration and what have been its benefits? Could local Freemasons hold workshops in places like Ferguson, Missouri and bring together blacks and whites, police and citizenry, in the common cause of brotherhood?

Freemasons, by their very nature, are eager for knowledge, eager for formal settings where serious conversation can occur about a range of topics. Perhaps these discussions can begin within lodges, articulating the principles and protocols that inculcate civility. And perhaps this is a logical place for the meaningful conversations to start: among brothers who rely and trust one another in a safe environment.

## **CONSEQUENCES AND QUESTIONS**

The question of its public persona is as old as Masonry itself. Within 20 years of the founding of the Grand Lodge in London in 1717, lodges were forbidden in the Dutch Republic because of their Orangist associations; they were spied on in France by the police; even in Britain, where they were a homegrown phenomenon, they were attacked from the pulpit.

Will contemporary American brothers run the same risk if they openly engage with the problem of incivility? Conspiracy theorists still lurk out there in the shadows. And in tackling any public issue – especially where politics is involved – one should expect a certain amount of hostility. Not all brothers will welcome this. In the public arena and among their own membership, the grand lodges would have their work cut out for them.

And so, how do Freemasons proceed? Should American lodges rethink their role in civil society?

As originally formulated by the German philosopher George Hegel, the concept of civil society denotes a zone of independent social life, separate from the state and from the traditional institutions of family, church, confraternities, etc. It is a place where the individual can be independent, mindful of events, forceful in his or her opinions, and also exercise freedom. For Hegel, “The history of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom.” This “progress of freedom” would suggest that the uncivil has just as much a right to be voiced as the polite.

But what if the uncivil drives people out of the zone of engagement, forced out by the uncouth, the mean, impolite, racist, sexist, etc.; left then to retreat into the privacy of family – or even of the lodge? If that is what is now happening, then do participants in civil society have an obligation to change the nature and tone of the discussion? We are a republic without monarchy or aristocracy; here in America, leadership comes from the citizenry. Do Masons, in particular, have a responsibility to address social ills, to address our common humanity?

These are questions that only Freemasons can answer, armed with their history of republican idealism. It is not unthinkable for Masons to lead the way to a society in which more civil behaviors reign, and respect for one another, and differing opinions, is paramount. Just remember the theaters of 18th century London, and that Masons were able to lead by example to make a more meaningful experience for all. Perhaps now is the time for history to repeat itself. Let the questioning begin.

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*Editor's note: Margaret C. Jacob, Ph.D., is among the world's foremost Masonic scholars. She is largely responsible for documenting and establishing connections between early European Freemasonry and the craft today. Through a partnership with the Grand Lodge of California, Dr. Jacob leads the development of academic courses on the history of Freemasonry and civil society at the University of California, Los Angeles.*

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## A Partnership for Civility

Masons in California and throughout the country have been taking the matter of civility to heart over the past several years, and thinking hard about what actions they might take to make a positive impact in our society. At the 2014 Conference of Grand Masters of North America in Baltimore, Masonic leaders from throughout Canada, the U.S., and Mexico discussed ways in which Freemasonry might be helpful in efforts to build a more civil society. Their ideas were threefold:

- Work to be more civil in all individual dealings with all people, Masonic and non-Masonic
- Create tools based on Masonic tenets and values to be made available to every member across North America and eventually society at large
- Convene and partner with other entities that share the objective of creating a more civil society

*“Civility is a variation of the ‘Golden Rule.’ It is being kind, courteous, polite, and avoiding overt rudeness. In community improvement it relates to higher-minded and self-sacrificing behavior. Civility is the “how” when it comes to building relationships.”*

—Jay Newman & Kent Roberts

This third idea has resulted in a partnership between the Grand Lodge of California and the National Civility Center, an Iowa-based non-profit organization that is dedicated to helping people make their communities better places to live through a comprehensive approach to community improvement. This approach includes engaging community members and local organizations to become more effective at solving tough social issues through listening, dialogue, and authentic human connections.

In September, Kent Roberts, founder and executive director of the National Civility Center, spoke to more than 200 Masons at the California Masonic Symposium in San Francisco and Pasadena, California. During his speech, Roberts made an inspiring point: Studies of thriving and flourishing organizations have shown that when positivity

is instilled into them, a profound impact is made upon them. And, he's convinced that Masonic values can be the positive injection that society needs to become more civil.

The partnership is working to build a civility toolkit – an easy-to-use kit based on Masonic values and a list of “rules of engagement” that will help people build connections and dialogue to find common ground. The kits will be used across the country to help build a foundation for finding effective, workable solutions for divisive issues within communities.

Kent Roberts' final words at the Symposium were in the form of a question that we may all ask ourselves: “If not you, who? And if not Freemasons, who?”

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For more information about the National Civility Center and its mission, visit [civilitycenter.org](http://civilitycenter.org).