

## **ISLAM AND FREEMASONRY**

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Assalaamo Alaikum, that is, peace be with you!

Worshipful Master, distinguished brethren and brethren: I am pleased to submit my dissertation with some trepidation, as I feel unequal to doing justice to this complex subject in a space of 20 odd minutes. But, I was persuaded to take up the challenge by the encouragement and assistance of W Bros Shiva Banerjee and Ronald Ng, whom I could not disappoint.

Islam has been much in the limelight these days. I have been diligent in attending to my duties as both, a mason and a Muslim and have come to realise that Islam and masonry are indeed compatible. Freemasonry may even be considered complementary to Islam as its principles only go to reinforce a Muslim brother's own faith; contrary to the misconceptions widely held among my Muslim brethren from various sects. The distrust perhaps arises from the fact that masonic symbols are derived from segments of the Old Testament such as the Temple of King Solomon, which gives the uninstructed world the erroneous impression that masons are Zionists. It is serious enough for masonry to have been brought into question in Malaysia in the late 70s. Yet, the Old Testament is not excluded from the beliefs of Islam. On the contrary, King Solomon is considered to have been a follower of Islam<sup>1</sup>! More of this later ... Anyway, masons are obligated to submit to the laws of the VSL, which, in the case of the Muslim brethren in the Craft, is the Holy Quran, if they so desire.

In this sense, the Antient Charges are also relevant. They direct the masons "to obey the moral law... and practice the sacred duties of morality". They exhort him to "never be a stupid atheist nor an irreligious libertine". Masons are to "let a man's religion or mode of worship be what it may... provided he believes in the glorious architect of heaven and

earth,” They are advised that **“by the purity of their own conduct, to demonstrate the superior excellence of the faith they may profess”**. Thus masonry is the centre of union between good men and true.” At home and in his neighbourhood a mason is urged by the Antient Charges *“to act as becomes a moral and wise man... avoiding of gluttony or drunkenness... to give honour to whom it is due, and avoid ill manners.”*<sup>2</sup> That, and the three grand principles: *“Brotherly love, Relief and Truth”* summarise what the fraternity teaches and expects of every man who of his *“own free will and accord”*<sup>3</sup> submits to its dictates.

An essential need of a mason is his inalienable belief in the Supreme Being, God, Lord, Allah or Almighty. The term Islam, on the other hand, means submission to the Divine Will and Guidance of Allah and to follow the Divine Laws. The one who follows the divine Laws is called a Muslim. It therefore must follow that both Islam and masonry have existed from time immemorial and risen from the same roots. For this reason, King or Nabi (meaning prophet) Solomon is believed to have been a Muslim. I will shortly review Surah No. 27, Al Naml, of the Holy Quran, to explain this point of view.

In this context, however, we should also reflect on the Charge delivered to the initiate of masonry, which at one point states: *“As a Freemason, let me recommend to your most serious contemplation the VSL<sup>4</sup>, charging you to consider it as the unerring standard of truth and justice and to regulate your actions by the divine precepts it contains. Therein you will be taught the important duties you owe to God, to your neighbour and yourself. To God, by never mentioning His name but with that awe and reverence which are due from the creature to his Creator, by imploring His aid in all your lawful undertakings, and by looking up to Him in every emergency for comfort and support. To your neighbour, by rendering him every kind office which justice or mercy may require, by relieving his necessities and soothing his afflictions, and by doing to him as in similar cases you would wish he would do to you.”*<sup>5</sup> Evidently, masonry seeks only to reaffirm whatever faith a Brother holds, be it Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism etc. except, if he should be an atheist, and in which case he cannot be accepted as a mason.

Prophet Mohd was bestowed prophethood at the age of 40. One of the first decrees he promulgated was to inform the business community to use the same set of scales when conducting business transactions. In those days, traders used two sets of scales: one for buying & the other for selling. The prophet abolished that system, citing unscrupulous business dealings. In the same way the masonic Charge after Initiation mentions... *“and by doing to him in similar cases you would wish he would do to you.”* Or, as in one of our working tools explanation: *“Thus by square conduct, level steps and upright intentions we hope to ascend”*<sup>6</sup> ...”.

Allah in Islam has 100 beautiful names, and this cluster of names is called Asmaul Husna. They are His Divine attributes like All knowing, All Powerful, The Creator, The Cherisher, The Just, The Kind & Forgiving, All Seeing etc. Similarly, the masons refer to Allah by His various attributes too such as: TGAOTU, TGGOTU, TMH, TTALGMH, TGOOTU, TSCOTU and so on. Also, Allah can be beseeched by: “Ya HoVa”, the One and Only or “La Ilaha Il Lal Lah”, None but Allah, or as in the Chapter: The Tetragrammaton or TTALGMH or El Elohe (Lord God).

For the Muslim masons, the Holy Quran is one of the three Emblematical Lights in

masonry. It is referred to as the VSL. The former mentions all the Prophets, whom Allah sent, 124,000 in all, to different countries and peoples of the world from time to time, beginning with Adam and ending with Mohamed. The Main Prophets identified are Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Mohamed. All are said to have performed miracles. The Quran was Mohamed's miracle, it being the Words of Allah, which were carried by Angel Gibrael (Gabriel) for promulgation to the world by Mohamed. Again, just as the masons are encouraged to memorise the rituals for the better understanding of the messages enshrined in them, the Muslims consider it their duty to memorise parts of the Quran that are extensively used in the rituals of prayers, which for most, like the old English in the masonic rituals, is in an unfamiliar language. A person who memorizes the entire Quran is highly respected and is called a Hafiz. Not unlike our masonic ritualists, who are held in high regard in the fraternity.

Prophet Abraham, or Ibrahim, was the Patriarch and he was the first to build the Kaba in Mecca. As I had said earlier, Prophet Abraham (Ibrahim), Prophet Moses (Musa) and Prophet Jesus (Esa) had performed miracles. Nabi Esa, or Prophet Jesus, had performed the most number of miracles. Nabi Esa's first miracle, as mentioned in the Holy Quran, was when Miriam (Mary) entered the chamber with her child in her arms. The Elders chided her, saying: "Hey Miriam, what have you brought?" In response, Mariam pointed at the Baby – indicating that the question be put to the Baby instead – when He (Esa) answered: "Do not scold my Mother, she has done no wrong. I am the Nabi Esa <sup>7</sup>.

I have endeavoured so far to explain that both Islam and masonry have the same root, neither contradicting the other nor can either be identified reasonably as Zionists. Let me now give you a little insight into Islam, and more particularly its sectarian developments, along with some information on my own sect. The latter, because it appears to be historically connected to the scriptures adopted by masonry.

As I have already stated, Prophet Mohammed's (pbuh) most important miracle was the Holy Quran. Every word in the Quran is the word of Allah (swt). The Quran is divided into 114 Chapters called *Surah*. Each *Surah*, except for one, begins with "*Bismillah Hir Rah Ma Nir Rahim*" (BHRMNR) in praise of Allah, meaning: "In The Name of Allah The Most Gracious The Most Merciful." But the *Surah* No.9, *Al Tawbah* or Repentance, does not begin with BHRMNR. It has been speculated to be the continuation of *Surah* No 8. These words appear twice, however, in Chapter No.27 to make up the BHRMNR appearing 114 times in the Holy Quran, once in the usual manner at the beginning of the *Surah* and again in the letter within, in which Nabi Suleiman (King Solomon) wrote to Queen Bilqis, the queen of Sheba, inviting her to accept Islam, that is to follow Divine Laws. He had started his letter with the words BHRMNR, as it has always been so done by a Muslim. It lends weight to the belief that the Grand Master of masons was also an ancient Muslim! This *Surah* No.27 is called, *Al Naml*, or "The Ant". Queen Bilqis reigned over a powerful empire in Yemen and her headquarters were in Hadhramaut, 20 miles North of Sana (Capital of Yemen).

The first Chapter in the Holy Quran is called *Surah Fatihah*, also known as *Hamd*, meaning praise of Allah. Like every book, this first *Surah* acts as an introduction to the Quran. This Chapter has seven verses and is used extensively at every *Majlis* or Meeting or in functions like: Wedding, Divorce, Death Anniversary and Burial Ceremony. It is recited in the "Five Times Prayers" and "Supplications" as well. This *Surah* is:

1. In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.
2. Praise be to Allah The Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds;
3. Most Gracious, Most Merciful;
4. Master of the Day of Judgement.
5. Thee do we worship, And Thine aid we seek.
6. Show us the straight way,
7. The way of those on whom Thou hast bestowed Thy Grace, Those whose (portion) Is not wrath, And who go not astray.

The practice merits comparison with the masonic rituals of saying a prayer or grace to TMH before and after every significant masonic event.

Though all the Muslims believe in the One and Only Allah and the same Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) and the one unabridged Holy Quran, they are divided into several sects. The two main sects are the Sunni and the Shi'a. But, there are many other sub sects or groups. Again, not unlike the many Grand Lodges and rituals in masonry.

Sunnis consider 1st) Hazrat Abu Baker, 2nd) Hazrat Omar, 3rd) Hazrat Osman, and 4th) Hazrat Ali as successors of Prophet Mohammed and were based in Medina. They are recognised as Khalifas.

Shi'as, on other hand, regard Ali Ibne Abi Talib, the son-in-law & cousin of Prophet Mohammed, as the successor and Khalifa. After Ali, the Shi'as followed Imam Hassan and then Hussein; and so the reign from their base in Kufa in District Najaf, Iraq, was passed from father to son. The father designated one of his sons as his successor. The Shi'as are also called Imamiyas or the followers of Imam.

Taking Ali as the first Imam, the seventh Imam was Ismail and the 14th was Moez. The 21st, Taiyeb was the last of the Fatimid Imams, being the progeny of Ali / Fatema. Fatimid Imams ruled North Africa including Egypt and Sudan for two centuries<sup>8</sup>. Imam Moez founded the Al Azhar University in Cairo, which is still in existence. Recently the Imam or Dean or Mufti of Al Hazar University, Imam Mohammed Tantavi had visited Singapore.

Imam Taiyeb, the last of the historically important Fatimid Imams, instructed Queen Arwa (Arabic name: Hurratul Malika) to appoint several Syednas, or Chairmen, to carry on the Dawah or Mission in different parts of the world. Queen Arwa was the ruler from the same country, Yemen, and the same seat of Learning and at the same town of Hadhramaut as Queen Bilqis, the Queen of Sheba or Saba. Queen Arwa appointed the 1st Syedna, Syedna Zoeb, to carry on the Mission in Yemen, Hind (India)<sup>9</sup>, & Sind (Pakistan)<sup>10</sup>. Each Syedna nominates his successor. Today, the 52nd Syedna is His Holiness Dr. Abul Quaid Johar Mohammed Burhanuddin Saheb tus. I belong to this sect, which is known as "Mustalian Taiyebi Sect of Dawoodi Bohras". Our Community is about 1.2 Million spread out in all parts of the world. We follow the Mission as instructed by Imam Taiyeb. The affairs of the community are conducted by the joint rule of three known as the Syedna, Mazoon and Mukasir. These three rulers may be compared, though with significant differences, with the Principals of an RAC in the Craft: **Syedna** as the First Principal; **Mazoon** as the Second Principal and **Mukasir** as the Third Principal.

Then we have huzzoorias, dewans etc who are the junior officers and may be compared with the Scribes, Sojourners etc. of an RAC. There are no elections. The Syedna is nominated by his predecessor to assume office after the latter's death and then the new Syedna appoints all his officers.

Some of the Shi'a sects, including my own sub-sect, instead of the usual five pillars<sup>11</sup> of Islam, have Seven Pillars, the two additional ones being:

1. The Oath of Allegiance to Succession and
2. The Taharat — meaning cleanliness – Outward and Inner leading to Hereafter<sup>12</sup>.

Anyone born in a Bohra family is not recognized a Bohra until he or she is INITIATED, just like the Initiation in masonry, though the ceremonies are not comparable. The initiate must be of mature age, however, generally 13/14 years for a girl and 14/16 for a boy, and that he or she must come of his own free will. No coercion or pressure from the parents is permissible. This Initiation Ceremony is known as MISAQ.

The parents present him/her to the Syedna or his representative called Aamil, after a Bath and Wuzu, not symbolically washing his feet as in some of our masonic rituals. The ceremony of *Misaq* takes about one hour when the principles peculiar to the sect are communicated. It is stressed that the knowledge of the ceremony is confined within the community, just as the so-called secrets of the Craft. Then the oath of recognition and acceptance of: the Unseen; the Supreme Being that is Allah; Heaven; Hell; the Angels; the Holy Books; the Prophets; Prophet Mohammed; Ali and his Progeny and finally, the present Syedna. Then a charge is given, as in the Craft first Degree mentioned earlier, for Truth, Unity and Love of Brotherhood. To read the Quran very regularly and slowly, and with understanding, as the rituals in the Craft, and to follow the precepts laid down. To attend, if possible, the Mosque for Prayers and to answer any calls made by the Aamil, the representative... just as masons are extolled to answer the lawful summons and to attend all meetings. And finally, to follow the Shariyah, meaning the 7 Pillars, which are *Walayat* (Succession), *Taharat* (Cleanliness), *Salaat* (Prayers), *Zakat* (Charity), *Haj* (Pilgrimage), *Saum* (Fasting), and *Jihad* (Resistance to injustice).

Here, let me digress to refer to: “seven or more to make a perfect Lodge”<sup>13</sup>. The Emulation rituals suggest that the number alludes “to seven liberal Arts and Sciences” that a mason is required to research to progress in life, namely: “Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic, Arithmetic, Geometry, Music and Astronomy”. Esoterically, the numbers, 3, 5 and 7 may be said to allude to the harmony of body, soul and spirit of a Lodge represented by the JW, SW and the Master respectively; the five representing the five senses namely, sight, hearing, smell, feel and taste, which together with instinct and faith of man in the Supreme Being make seven. The masonic “five points of fellowship” is another example of the five duties pledged to assist a brother. These are not similar but certainly complementary. In Islam too, the embracing of a Muslim brother, breast to breast, has a similar meaning, both in happiness & in sorrow.

Prayers in Islam have two parts. The first part is always the same, with a ritual to stand, kneel, prostrate and sit. This ritual is called Selaat, and must be said in Arabic and must be from memory, as in the Craft, and facing the Kaba; the East in the Craft. The 2nd part of the prayers is called the Dua or supplications, which can be said in ones mother tongue. After Every Dua all the people say, Amin, so mote it be! After every prayer and Dua, there

follows a handshake and the hand must be pulled asunder, as in some masonic rituals, in a pledge to remain a brother “until death do us part, to meet in the Hereafter”.

Majlis are meetings, generally held in the Mosque like our temple or in an adjoining hall or room. Every meeting or any function begins with a Dua seeking Gods Grace, which called Hamd, as I have mentioned earlier. And every meeting ends with a Dua for favours received from the Almighty for having marked well. The practice must sound familiar to every mason. Doors to a Majlis are never closed, but latecomers make a Tasleem or bow at the entrance, as a mason does on entry into an open Chapter, and on receiving a nod from the presiding Aamil takes his appointed place. Brotherhood is observed during the Five Prayers, when all fall in line behind the Imam who leads the Selaat; The Ritual.

Women sit in the upper Hall of the Mosque, segregated from the men. Brotherhood is also observed at the Festive board where there is no protocol. The diners sit in groups of eight persons on the floor in a circle at a Safra (tablecloth), and a thal (big dish about three and a half feet in diameter). The host, with his helpers, wash the guests’ hands with a small basin and pitcher. After the guests have settled down, the host proclaims BHRMNR ... to commence service. One of the eight in each circle presents a small dish of salt and each one takes a pinch. The same is repeated after the group has finished the meal. The meal is concluded with a thanks-giving prayer to Allah.

The significance of the salt is similar to that in Consecration and some other masonic ceremonies. The prayer, before and after a meal, is also practiced in masonry.

My Community follows the lunar calendar where all the important dates are marked on the calendar. This is similar to the masonic calendar. Thus, all major events like New Year, Muharram, Birthdays of Prophet Mohammed and the current Syedna and death anniversaries of martyrs, and other major events are marked. Except for death and burial ceremonies, no other social functions are permitted to be held on those specific dates in the calendar. Similarly, masons too should perhaps avoid conflicts between Craft meetings and social activities, neither being less important.

Incidentally, a Good Standing Certificate is required for undertaking ceremonies like Wedding, Misaq, and Haj Pilgrimage. A Safai Chitthi (Gujarati for Clearance certificate) is needed to prove that all dues to the community have been settled for before the event. Similar to the masonic practice of receiving a stranger or a joining brother!

Brethren, I have tried to bring to your attention an issue that is close to my heart. In my pursuit to strictly conform to the Islamic principles and practices, I have never found my masonic duties to be in conflict or a hindrance. On the contrary, I have found my masonic duties to be complementary and in harmony with those of Islam. In this District, which is set in a population comprising more than half who are followers of Islam, I close with a fervent and humble hope that this paper may in a small way help to alleviate whatever prevailing distrust that may be extant among my fellow Muslim brethren towards our Craft.

Thank you!

References:

1. Surah 27: Al Naml.
2. Antient Charges – Concerning God & Religion and Of Behaviour.
3. A part of every obligation undertaken by a mason.
4. The Holy Quran, as far as the followers of Islam are concerned.
5. Charge after Initiation – Revised Emulation ritual.
6. Emulation 2nd Degree W/T.
7. Surah No 19, Sec 2.
8. *“The Middle East – A brief History of The Last 2,000 Years”* by Bernard Lewis – pp 83-84.
9. Hind, referred to that part of the Indian sub-continent, which was to the east of the Indus river.
10. The Indus river basin, a part of the Indian sub-continent, now Pakistan, which came about only in 1947.
11. Prayers, Charity, Pilgrimage, Fasting and Resistance to injustice.
12. Taharat is included in the prayers.
13. Second Degree Tracing Board.