



Independent Order of Odd Fellows  
Dedicated Members for Change

October 26, 2014

Dear Dedicated Members for Change,

The subject of today's newsletter will, undoubtedly, be perceived by some as controversial. But just because it's controversial, doesn't mean we shouldn't discuss it. Believe me when I say that I do not mean to offend - but only to broach a subject that most in our Order have, essentially, ignored for decades. Yet, it is a subject that directly affects our ability to attract new members on this Continent and around the world.

I correspond with a number of Odd Fellows throughout the United States and Canada, as well as Europe. It is interesting to note that while we are all bound by the ties of Odd Fellowship, our rituals and practices differ - sometimes with considerable variation. I learned, for example, from a brother in Denmark, that the Chaplain during Lodge meetings does not recite a prayer as we do in North America. Instead, once at the beginning of the meeting, and once toward the end of the meeting, the Chaplain offers a contemplative thought for the day. Further, the Lodges in Denmark do not keep a Bible in the Lodge room.

And the Lodges in many countries of Europe - particularly Scandinavia - are strong and growing. In Denmark, there are 14,000 Odd Fellows (out of a national population of 5.6 million), in Sweden, there are 40,000 Odd Fellows (out of 9.6 million), in Norway, there are 23,500 Odd Fellows (out of 5 million), in Finland, there are 9,000 Odd Fellows (out of 5.4 million people). In Iceland, there are 3,649 Odd Fellows out of a population of 321,857 people - that's 1.13% of the nation's population, and they have been increasing at an annual rate of 2.2% for many years. Compare this to California where there are 4,000 Odd Fellows out of a population base of over 38 million. If, for example, our numbers of Odd Fellows to population were in the same ratio as Denmark, then we would have 95,000 Lodge members in California.

The practice in Denmark caused me to reflect on the practice in the United States and Canada, because there is a distinct difference in our ritual. I'm going to broach the subject at this time, even though I understand it may be a difficult subject for many in our Order, and controversial. But it needs to be discussed and considered - because it may very well affect our efforts at growing our Order. And let me put on the table - right here at the beginning - that I, personally, believe in a Supreme Being. That being said, it seems to me that we have an inherent conflict, and perhaps a dichotomy, as we approach the issue of "religion" in our Order and in our Lodges. Let me be specific.

In Odd Fellowship we proudly say that our Lodges are non-sectarian, and we purport to welcome potential members of all religions. The Sovereign Grand Lodge website explicitly says that Odd



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Fellowship is "non-sectarian". But what does that mean? The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the term non-sectarian as follows: "Not affiliated with or restricted to a particular religious group."

Are we truly non-sectarian?

It appears to me that we are not. Consider the fact that Odd Fellowship requires that a member must believe in "a Supreme Being" and we keep a copy of the Holy Bible in the Lodge room and we read from it. Parenthetically, we also offer a New Testament prayer in the Lodge. How are these practices consistent with being non-sectarian and being open to members of all religions? If we are completely honest with ourselves, we must conclude that they are not.

Further, there are major religions on this planet which do not have "a Supreme Being" - for example, Buddhists and Hindus. Our requirement of belief in a Supreme Being would seem to exclude these, and other people from membership. That is a real shame since one billion people on this planet are Hindu, and another 400 million are Buddhists. Further, why does our non-sectarian philosophy compel the Old Testament in the Lodge room? There are religions - some with hundreds of millions of followers - which follow other books - the Koran, for example, or the Talmud, the Tripitaka, the Vedas, or even the Book of Mormon, etc. If one is a Christian, then the Lodge room and ritual is a very comfortable place. But if one is a follower of other religions - for example, a Muslim, or a Sikh, or a Hindu - the Lodge room can be quite uncomfortable and can conflict with their religious and spiritual beliefs.

And what about the Deists? Many great Americans were and are members of the Deist belief including Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, James Madison, Ethan Allen, John Muir, Mark Twain, Thomas Alva Edison, Neil Armstrong, among others. Deists certainly believe in a Supreme Being - but they eschew the writings of man - such as the Bible, the Koran, the Talmud, the Book of Mormon, the Vedas, etc. Having a Bible in a Lodge room can be a direct affront to and uncomfortable for a Deist - yet Deists fit nicely in the requirement that an Odd Fellow believe in a Supreme Being. If we profess to be an Order that is non-sectarian, how is keeping and quoting a Christian Bible in accord with that philosophy?

How much more accommodating and truly non-sectarian is the approach of Odd Fellows in Denmark. In those Lodge rooms the Chaplain does not read a prayer - instead, the Chaplain offers a thought for the day at the beginning of the Lodge meeting and a thought for the day at the end of the Lodge meeting. And there is no Bible - or any other religious work - in the Lodge room itself.



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This conflict in philosophy of our Order creates a wall excluding members who reside around the world, and in our own country. Where is the proof? Look at your own Lodge. How many Buddhists or Hindus or Muslims or Sikhs are members of your Lodge?

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Dave Rosenberg  
Deputy Grand Master