



Independent Order of Odd Fellows
Dedicated Members for Change

October 29, 2014

Dear Dedicated Members for Change,

In the last DMC Newsletter (October 26, 2014) I raised the issue of Odd Fellowship's approach to "religion". Our approach is so inconsistent that I have dubbed it the "Great Dichotomy." This Great Dichotomy can be found throughout the writings, practices and ritual of our Order. To see an example of the Great Dichotomy, one need look no farther than the very "Membership Application" form (promulgated by Sovereign Grand Lodge) which we all filled out when we first applied and which we require all prospective members to review and complete. In one sentence of that membership application form the following is stated: "Odd Fellowship strictly forbids any interference with one's religious beliefs" And then, in another sentence on the very same form, the following is stated: "Odd Fellowship, however, does require that all members must believe in a Supreme Being" These two sentences are in conflict.

There are, as we all know, many religions on this planet which do not have "a Supreme Being" including, for example, Hinduism and Buddhism. How do we not "interfere with one's religious beliefs" when we require all members to "believe in a Supreme Being"? How do we not "interfere with one's religious beliefs" of Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, Mormons, Deists, Hindus, and many others, when it is required that the Holy Bible be kept in the Lodge room and members must recite the Christian New Testament's Lord's Prayer?

One of the purposes of DMC is to serve as a "think tank" for Odd Fellowship - to get the cranial juices flowing and to address issues which have been swept under the rug, or ignored, for too long. If we fail to address issues that concern us, our membership will continue to diminish. I have received many e-mails following that last DMC article - the vast majority of which were favorable. Bottom line comment from most people was: "It's about time we talked about that!"

Our Brother Louie Sarmiento has done some research into the history of "religion" in this Order, and the results of his work are fascinating and may very well surprise you. The Great Dichotomy did not exist earlier in our Order's history. Louie's research shows yet another example of the evolution and change inherent in the history of Odd Fellowship. Perhaps it is time to do some more evolving and changing. Following is Louie's work on this most interesting topic.

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Dave Rosenberg



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Deputy Grand Master

Hello brothers and sisters,

Greetings!

Personally, I have no problem having the Lord's Prayer and the Holy Bible during meetings because I am a Christian. In my research study I sent to members of the Executive Committee of the Sovereign Grand Lodge last July 2014, however, I mentioned the "sectarian nature" in our rituals that needs some attention. As an organizational psychologist, it is obvious that this is a hindrance for people of other faiths to join or participate in our Fraternal Order and may have also contributed to the decline of membership in the Order. The world today has become more diverse and sensitive of the beliefs of other people. In fact, there are now many people belonging to the younger generations who do not profess any "religion" and just believe in God. The number of atheists also increased substantially so these groups of people will surely not join the Odd Fellows Lodge. I know several people who shared that there are some people who first wanted to join the Odd Fellows but eventually did not join or dropped their membership because some of the current practices in our meetings are in conflict with the religion and beliefs of people professing other religions. These practices evident in the Lodges in North America include placing the Holy Bible inside the Lodge room during meetings and reciting the Lord's prayer which makes the Odd Fellows appear "sectarian" and even "religious". Using the operational definition of "non-sectarian", these practices are in no doubt contradictory to our Order's stand of "non-sectarianism" and "respect for other people's creed". Such practices can be viewed as impolite to members of our Order who profess other religions not related to Christianity, and will continue to discourage people who are not Christians from joining the Lodge. But are these practices really our traditions?

I am aware that removing the Bible and Lord's Prayer during lodge meetings can be very controversial and sensitive to senior members who are used to doing what they have been taught to do but have not reviewed the changes of our rituals and practices from the late Eighteenth Century up to 2003. I am lucky to be at the Sovereign Grand Lodge for a period of time and continue to have direct access to old documents, old version of our rituals and records of our beloved Order. Today, I wanted to find out when the Lord's Prayer and the Holy Bible were added. Here are some facts, which may surprise you:



Independent Order of Odd Fellows
Dedicated Members for Change

- **Ritual of the Order of Patriotic Odd Fellows (Year 1797):** The oldest Odd Fellows ritual available DOES NOT contain any prayer or the Lord's Prayer or the Bible during initiations or Lodge meetings. The content of the rituals are clearly influenced by the ideas of the "Age of Enlightenment" which talks about universal fraternity, tolerance for other people's beliefs and religious freedom (people are free to choose their religion without fear of prosecution or condemnation). There is actually no mention of a "chaplain" as an officer of the Lodge.
- **Lectures and Charges of the Independent Order of Odd Fellowship (Year 1820):** The thoughts are general and clearly non-sectarian. NO prayers were required during lodge meetings and initiations. There is NO mention of a "chaplain" as an officer of the Lodge. It only mentions "God" but no specific name of God. No mention of the Bible during opening ceremony. In fact, the Holy Bible is also not a part of the symbolism of the degrees of the Order either. Both opening and closing ceremony can be done within 2-5 minutes as compared to current version used by the lodges.
- **Ritual of the Manchester Unity, Independent Order of Odd Fellows (Year 1824):** The opening ceremony or closing ceremonies DOES NOT contain the Lord's Prayer or any prayer at all. The Holy Bible is also not mentioned or a requirement during lodge meetings. The Holy Bible is not yet even a part of the symbols of the degrees of the Order. There is still no mention of a "chaplain" as an officer of the Lodge. Both opening and closing ceremony can be done within 2-5 minutes as compared to the current version used by the lodges.
- **Ritual of the Grand Lodge of Maryland, I.O.O.F. (Year 1831):** The opening ceremony of this ritual also does not contain the Lord's Prayer. In fact, the opening ceremony and closing ceremony does not have ANY prayer. The opening ceremony just mentions the roles of each officer and the Noble Grand declaring the lodge opened in the opening, and declaring the lodge closed in the closing. There is also no mention of a "chaplain" as an officer of the lodge. Both opening and closing ceremony can be done within 2-5 minutes as compared to the current version used by the lodges. The Holy Bible was also not yet a part of the symbolism of the degrees of our Order.
- **Ritual of the Grand Lodge of the United States, I.O.O.F. (Year 1835):** Still clearly shows the non-sectarian nature of our Order influenced by the ideas of the Age of Enlightenment. Both opening and closing ceremony DO NOT contain the Lord's Prayer and actually do not even contain any prayer or require the presence of the Holy Bible during meetings. I repeat there was no prayer during the opening and closing ceremony. The Holy Bible is also not a part of the symbolism of the degrees of the Order yet. There remains no



Independent Order of Odd Fellows
Dedicated Members for Change

mention of a "chaplain" as an officer of the Lodge. Both opening and closing ceremony can be done within 2-5 minutes as compared to current version used by the lodges.

- **Regulations for the Opening, Conducting Business and Closing the Lodge together with the Form of Initiation for the use of the Subordinate Lodges, under the Grand Lodge of the United States, I.O.O.F. (Year 1841):** Retains the non-sectarian nature of our Order. Both opening and closing ceremony DO NOT also contain the "Lord's Prayer". There was no prayer at all during both opening and closing ceremonies so the Holy Bible was also not a requirement during Lodge meetings. There remains no mention of a "chaplain" as an officer of the Lodge. Both opening and closing ceremony can be done within 2-5 minutes as compared to current version used by the lodges.

- **Regulations for the Opening, Conducting Business and Closing the Lodge together with the Form of Initiation for the use of the Subordinate Lodges, under the Grand Lodge of the United States, I.O.O.F. (Year 1848):** The same as the 1841 version. NO prayer recited during both opening and closing ceremony. Does not mention any specific Holy book such as the Bible. There remains no mention of a "chaplain" as an officer of the Lodge. Both opening and closing ceremony can be done within 2-5 minutes as compared to current version used by the lodges.

- **Regulations for the Opening, Conducting Business and Closing the Lodge together with the Form of Initiation for the use of the Subordinate Lodges, under the Grand Lodge of the United States, I.O.O.F. (Year 1870):** Retains the non-sectarian nature of our Order. Both opening and closing ceremony DO NOT also contain the "Lord's Prayer" or any prayer at all. The Holy Bible was also not a requirement during Lodge meetings. There remains no mention of a "chaplain" as an officer of the Lodge. Both opening and closing ceremony can be done within 2-5 minutes as compared to current version used by the lodges.

- **Regulations for the Opening, Conducting Business and Closing the Lodge together with the Form of Initiation for the use of the Subordinate Lodges, under the Grand Lodge of the United States, I.O.O.F. (Year 1871):** Almost the same as the 1870 version and continued to retain the non-sectarian nature of our Order. Both opening and closing ceremony DO NOT also contain the "Lord's Prayer" or any prayer at all. The Holy Bible was also not a requirement during Lodge meetings. There remains no mention of a "chaplain" as an officer of the Lodge. Both opening and closing ceremony can be done within 2-5 minutes as compared to current version used by the lodges.



Independent Order of Odd Fellows
Dedicated Members for Change

- **Lectures and Charges and Explanation of the Degrees of Subordinate Lodges, I.O.O.F., Grand Lodge of the United States (Year 1871):** The Holy Bible seem to first appear as one of the symbols of the Degree of Truth or Scarlet degree.

- **Regulations for the Opening, Conducting Business and Closing the Lodge together with the Form of Initiation for the use of the Subordinate Lodges, under the Grand Lodge of the United States, I.O.O.F. (Year 1873):** Almost the same as the 1870 and 1871 version and continued to retain the non-sectarian nature of our Order. Both opening and closing ceremony DO NOT also contain the "Lord's Prayer" or any prayer at all. The Holy Bible was also not a requirement during Lodge meetings. There remains no mention of a "chaplain" as an officer of the Lodge. The opening ceremony can be performed within 2-5 minutes and closing ceremony can be done in less than 1 minute as compared to the today's closing ceremony.

Lectures and Charges Explanatory of the Degrees of the Subordinate Lodges, under the Sovereign Grand Lodge, I.O.O.F (Year 1880): Both opening and closing ceremony DO NOT contain the "Lord's Prayer" and there is actually no opening and closing prayer at all so the Holy Bible was also not a requirement during Lodge meetings. There remains no mention of a "chaplain" as an officer of the Lodge. The opening ceremony can be performed within 2-5 minutes and closing ceremony can be done in 1-2 minutes as compared to today's closing ceremony.

- **Ritual of the Subordinate Lodge Under the Sovereign Grand Lodge, I.O.O.F. (Year 1900):** An opening prayer followed by the Lord's Prayer Our father who art in heaven, etc. began to appear during the opening ceremony. This is probably highly influenced by the strong Christian belief of majority of the leaders of the Order at that time. Many of the leaders and active members during this era are actually influential Christian ministers, pastors and church leaders. But there remains no mention of a "chaplain" as an officer of the Lodge so I guess nobody leads the prayer but all members of the lodge recite the prayer. The opening and closing ceremonies became longer. This time, it takes about 10-15 minutes to perform the opening ceremony and about 2-3 minutes to perform the closing ceremony. There was still no Odd Fellows valediction during the closing ceremony.

- **Ritual of the Subordinate Lodge Under the Sovereign Grand Lodge, I.O.O.F. (Year 1906):** Almost the same as the 1900 version. The Lord's Prayer follows after the opening prayer. But there remains no mention of a "chaplain" as an officer of the Lodge so I guess nobody leads the prayer but all members of



Independent Order of Odd Fellows
Dedicated Members for Change

the lodge recite the prayer. There was still no Odd Fellows valediction during the closing ceremony so closing ceremony takes just about 2-3 minutes.

- **Ritual of the Subordinate Lodge Under the Sovereign Grand Lodge, I.O.O.F. (Year 1928):** Almost the same as the 1906 version. The Lord's Prayer follows after the chaplain's opening prayer. The "Chaplain" as an officer of the Lodge began to appear. But there was still no Odd Fellows valediction during the closing ceremony so closing ceremony takes just about 2-3 minutes.

- **Ritual of the Subordinate Lodge Under the Sovereign Grand Lodge, I.O.O.F. (Year 1974):** Almost the same as the 1928 version. The Lord's Prayer follows after the chaplain's opening prayer. The Odd Fellows valediction began to appear and the closing ceremony became longer to approximately 5-10 minutes.

- **Present:** The rituals stayed almost the same as the 1974 version with very slight revisions.

So when people debate about the "traditions" of the Order, it is actually the rituals of the Odd Fellows in Europe that retains the "non-sectarian" nature and "ancient practices" of our Order. Hence, it is may be much easier for the European Odd Fellow lodges to embrace people from other religions to join lodges. This is probably why European Odd Fellows have more members and have a more diverse membership (in terms of religious affiliation of their members) as compared to the I.O.O.F. in North America although there are other factors to consider why European Odd Fellows now hold the strong-hold of I.O.O.F. In the U.S. and Canada and those directly under the Sovereign Grand Lodge, the current rituals issued seem to have contents that are "contradictory" and "inconsistent" with the "ancient landmarks" of the "Order of Odd Fellows" as a non-sectarian fraternal order. Take note that there was NO prayer at all during lodge meetings and initiations from the beginning in the later 1700's up to the 1890's. Such prayers and the "chaplain" as officer in the Odd Fellows Lodge are but "added only" by the Sovereign Grand Lodge during the early 20th Century. In Belgium and Netherlands, a brother shared to me that there remains NO "chaplain" as officer of the Lodge and no recitation of the Lord's Prayer.

We all know now that there remain only about 50,000 active Odd Fellows and Rebekahs in the U.S.A. and Canada. The Independent Grand Lodges in continental Europe now have a Grand Total of more than 95,000 Odd Fellows and Rebekahs. European Odd Fellowship, no doubt, seems to be more successful than jurisdictions directly under the Sovereign Grand Lodge. Hence, the Sovereign Grand Lodge may need to review the rituals of the European Odd



Independent Order of Odd Fellows
Dedicated Members for Change

Fellows and Rebekahs and try to learn or adopt them. I personally have reviewed an English translation of the Lodge ritual of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows under the Grand Lodge of the Kingdom of Denmark. And with due respect, I will provide my personal feedback that the Danish version is indeed more appealing and superior than the current 2003 version issued by the Sovereign Grand Lodge. In fact, the Odd Fellows in the Republic of the Philippines might agree and might ask permission from the Sovereign Grand Lodge and the Grand Lodge of Denmark if our lodges in the Philippines could use the Danish version of the I.O.O.F. rituals once our Grand Lodge is instituted. I have also forwarded a copy of their rituals to our Noble Grands in the Philippines for review and recommendation. Hence, the Sovereign Grand Lodge obviously needs an evaluation and revision of the rituals they currently prescribe and make sure it does not contain anything contradictory to the "non-sectarian nature" of the Order because some of the practices added during the early 1900's are, without doubt, sectarian in nature.

In Friendship, Love and Truth,

Brother Louie Blake S. Sarmiento