



Nugget

A Peculiar System of Morality

Index

An explanation of the phrase 'A peculiar system of morality veiled in allegory'.

Summary

A de-construction of the phrase 'A peculiar system of morality veiled in allegory' used in the 'questions' associated with the First-Degree, which explores and explains both 'peculiar' and 'allegory'.

Keywords

First-Degree, Initiate, Questions, Peculiar, Allegory

A Peculiar System of Morality

The answer to the question ‘What is Freemasonry?’ that is asked of all Entered Apprentices before they are passed to the Second-Degree is, ‘*A peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols*’. Nowadays ‘peculiar’ normally means ‘odd’ or ‘weird’ and it is clear no-one is suggesting that Freemasonry is an odd or weird system of morality. However, there are still one or two contexts in which the word ‘peculiar’ is still used with the meaning it has in Freemasonry. One example would be the phrase ‘a royal peculiar’. There are a number of churches in England that are called ‘royal peculiars’: St. George’s Chapel, Windsor Castle is one such, Westminster Abbey is another.

Westminster Abbey is situated within the Diocese of London, but it does not come under the authority of the Bishop of London. The Dean of Westminster is answerable only to the Sovereign. Hence its title, a ‘royal peculiar’. A peculiar in this sense is a church or a region, or an organisation that is separate from or outside the jurisdiction of the authority that would normally be expected to govern it. It is separate or distinct and it is this meaning that is meant by saying Freemasonry is a peculiar system of morality.

To take another example, that of a non-royal peculiar. You may be familiar with the beer called ‘Old Peculier (sic.)’. It gets its name because Theakstons Brewery is situated in the Parish of Masham in Wensleydale which was a non-royal peculiar i.e. a parish that was separate from the arch-diocese of York and not under the jurisdiction of its Archbishop. Again the meaning is of somewhere or something that is separate and distinct. So when we talk of Freemasonry as being ‘*a peculiar system of morality*’, we mean that it is a separate or distinct system of morality: separate because it does not fall under the authority of any particular religion or denomination, and distinct because it is ‘veiled in allegory’ and ‘illustrated by symbols’.

I am sure we all understand what the symbols are and how they help us understand the moral lessons of Freemasonry. We have only to look at the Tracing Boards, especially the First-Degree Tracing Board; at the Jewels worn by the Officers of the Lodge; or listen to the explanation of the Working Tools of the Three Degrees to understand what Masonic symbolism is all about. But why, you may ask, is our distinct system of morality ‘veiled in allegory’? An allegory is a story that is used in order to convey abstract ideas or principles. For instance, Virgil’s story of Dido and Aeneas is an allegory. On the surface it tells of a Trojan Prince who lands in Carthage whose Queen, Dido, fell in love with him. He takes her to bed and then he dumps her. In despair, she commits suicide. The historical story is really of no relevance, it is the allegory that matters concerning the difference between love and lust, faithfulness and deceit, joy and despair. Moreover, these concepts can be interpreted by the reader or listener in any age, in any context and in any culture. That is the advantage of an allegory: it is outside time and place and is thus universal. The story of the death of Hiram Abiff in the Third-Degree is an allegory on faithfulness and it illustrates the verse from the Volume of Sacred Law, ‘*be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee a crown of life*’. However, because it is presented as an allegory, it can be understood in any age and in any culture, by an 18th century Englishman, or a 21st century Indian. Thus Freemasonry is indeed a ‘peculiar’ or separate and distinct system of morality using allegories and symbols to convey its universal message of faith in God and love of our neighbour.

##END##

Recommended use of Nuggets

Nuggets offer a short, simple and readily absorbed means of progressing Masonic knowledge and an easy way to introduce learning to Lodges and Chapters. It is hoped that they will become a regular feature of Lodge and Chapter meetings as well as a source for private-study.

Nuggets can be included as an item in the summons and read at most Lodge/Chapter meetings. They can be:

- Read by either a new or an experienced Mason with the minimum of preparation and practice; *though ideally, they need to be read a few times beforehand.*
- Themed with the meeting or activity.
- Used to initiate a discussion within a Lodge/Chapter, LOI/COI, or group.
- Read at home and shared as a topic for a future discussion.
- Used as a focus for an unplanned, informal discussion.

For further nuggets and other learning materials visit 'Solomon' at <http://solomon.ugle.org.uk>

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