

The Order of the Eastern Star
Charles St-Onge, February 2, 2003

Introduction

The Order of the Eastern Star is a female-oriented rite within the larger family of Masonic organizations. Like all Masonic orders, it is not expanding but rather aging and losing members, as are many other benevolent lodges and fraternities. Nonetheless, it boasts as many as 40,000 members in the province of Ontario, and several hundred thousand across North America.^A There are several books speaking out against Christian membership in the Masonic Lodge, but the Order of the Eastern Star (OES) is usually only “guilty by association”: few books speak out clearly against its ritual as being incompatible with Christianity. As will be demonstrated, this is largely due to the seemingly benign content of its ritual. However, the OES does have clear teachings that contradict Christianity as confessed in the Lutheran tradition.

History

The OES falls under the category of “Adoptive Masonry,” what might be called an “auxiliary”; sharing many of the same values yet remaining separate from the parent group. The impetus for the Order came from one Robert Morris, who served for a time as the Grand Master of the Masonic Lodge in Kentucky in the mid 19th Century.¹ He believed firmly that “Masonry should be for the entire family,” not just for men.² What was needed was some rite or ritual in which women could participate, alongside their Masonic husbands. The intention was “to place in the hands of the female relatives of Masons means whereby they could make themselves known to Masons as such...”³ Morris drew on rituals already existing in Sweden and France, at least prior to 1778.⁴ This ritual he modified and set out for an organization he originally called “The Supreme Constellation.” He titled himself the first “Grand Luminary” of this new organization.⁵ Only Master Masons of the Lodge, their wives, widows, mothers, sisters and daughters are eligible for membership in the OES.⁶

However, despite Morris’ best efforts, the organization floundered. Not until Robert Macoy of New York got hold of the organization did it truly take flight. Macoy, who would eventually become the Grand Patron of the Grand Chapter of New York of the OES, modified the ritual and advertised it widely.⁷ Soon chapters of the Order were being established across North America. Macoy helped organize the fledgling order into a three-level structure, not dissimilar to the Roman Catholic organizational structure. At the top of the organization, in place of the Holy See, was the General Grand Chapter. This was formed in 1876, and all Grand Chapters of the Order were members. The Grand Chapters were the main organizational level of the OES, serving much as the Dioceses of the Roman Church. The General Grand Chapter is an advisor to these chapters, but the responsibilities for most programs resides with the Grand Chapters. Beneath each Grand Chapter are subordinate chapters, roughly equivalent to parishes. Each Grand Chapter was headed by a Grand Matron and a Master Mason who served as Grand Patron, thus connecting the male Masonic lodges with the female-lead OES.

Although related to the Masonic Order, relations between the two have often been strained. The Grand Chapter of Ontario has considered eliminating membership in the Lodge or relation to a member as a prerequisite for joining the Order. Both the Grand Lodge of England and the Grand Lodge of Scotland have banned members from being patrons of the OES.⁸ For this reason the OES is not at all strong in Great Britain. Interestingly, many members of the Ontario Grand Chapter are Scottish and British immigrants to Canada.

^A I chose this organization for personal reasons. My mother is currently serving as the Grand Matron of the Ontario Grand Chapter. My sister is a star point officer of her chapter. My grandmother has served as a District Deputy Grand Matron, my grandfather as Grand Warder, as well as being a 33^o degree Mason, a past Master of the Lodge, and a Shriner. My father is also a 32^o degree Mason and is serving as “Grand Escort” for my mother.

Practice

The OES has five key teachings it wishes to inculcate in its membership. These are: “1) Fidelity to convictions, 2) Obedience to the demands of honor and justice, 3) Fidelity to kindred and friends, 4) Trustful faith and hope of eternal life and 5) Heroic endurance of the wrongs of persecution when demanded in defence of the truth.”⁹ As in the Lodge, these truths are communicated through a set ritual – a liturgy – that is performed over the course of a year in chapter meetings as well as during the Grand Chapter meetings held once a year, and the triennial General Grand Chapter meetings. In the case of the OES, the ritual is based on five biblical women who each embody one of the five teachings. Each of these women represents one point of a five pointed star – the Eastern Star from which the Order derives its name. These five are presented in the table below:¹⁰

<u>Name</u>	<u>Star Point</u>	<u>Color</u>	<u>Symbol</u>	<u>Teaching</u>
Adah	Daughter	Blue	Veil & Sword	Fidelity to convictions
Ruth	Widow	Yellow	Sheaf of Grain	Obedience to the demands of justice
Esther	Wife	White	Crown & Scepter	Fidelity to family and friends
Martha	Sister	Green	Broken Column	Trustful faith in eternal life
Electa	Mother	Red	Cup	Heroic endurance of persecution

The chief officer of each chapter is the Matron, who is elected to the office of Associate Conductress, and then in subsequent years fills the offices of Conductress, Associate Matron, and finally Matron. The Patron is the male counterpart of the Matron, though subordinate to her, and he is elected Sentinel then serves subsequently as Associate Patron before becoming Patron. Other elected officers include the Secretary and Treasurer. Positions appointed for one year by the Matron include the Chaplain, the Organist, the Marshall, the Warder, and all five Star Point Officers. With the exception of the Star Point officers, who are always female, the other officers may be male or female, though the Warder is traditionally a male.¹¹ The same officers exist in the Grand Chapter, though the title “Grand” is affixed to each title (ex: Grand Matron, Grand Electa). Officers of the General Grand Chapter serve for three years, meaning that a woman elected to the position of Associate Conductress will serve for nine years before beginning her three-year term as Most Grand Matron.

The ritual for each of the officers is taken solely out of the Protestant Christian Bible, both the Old and New Testaments. The name “Adah” is given to Jephthah’s Daughter, who was sacrificed by her father in fulfillment of a vow he had made (Judges 11:28-40). “Electa” is the name given to the “Elect Lady” of 2 John 1. For an example of the ritual surrounding this last officer, consider the following:

Electa: The second epistle of John is addressed to “the *elect* lady and her children.” Tradition delineates her as a lady who lived in the days of St. John the Evangelist...Having been reared a Pagan and afterwards becoming a convert to the Christian religion, she was subjected to severe trials and the most bitter persecution...She was visited by a band of soldiers, one of whom handed her the cross, with the command that she trample it underfoot. Electa, looking him steadfastly I the face, received the cross – precious symbol of her Saviour’s death - pressed it with ardor to her bosom and cast her eyes upward as a testimony to her love and loyalty to her Christian faith.

Twice in the ritual for the installation of Martha John 11:21-26 is read, including Jesus’ words, “I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.” At the end of the rite of installation, the Matron charges her sisters with these words: “My Sister, the members of the Order of the Eastern Star are related by the dearest ties to the members of the Masonic Fraternity; however, the Order is no part of that Ancient Institution.”¹² She goes on to urge that “your devotion to the great moral and social purposes of our Order is earnest and persistent.”¹³ Near the end of the

ceremony, the Patron explains the “walking of the Labyrinth,” the intricate steps taken in and around the chapter room by officers during the ritual. He tells the initiate,

No matter where your journeyings took you, you always returned to pass close to our Holy Altar on which rests the open Holy Bible [author’s note: never another ‘holy’ book]. Our wanderings may be devious and our footsteps uncertain, but so long as we keep close to God and his teachings, and return frequently to that Great Light for instruction, we may confidently believe that we will come safely to the end of our journey.¹⁴

All of the ritualistic work, in this way, is centered on the living of a moral and virtuous “Judaeo-Christian” life. Christ’s work as Savior is never completely ignored; it is included, as mentioned above in Martha’s speech to the initiate as well as in the optional Patron’s address. Electa’s refusal to stamp on the cross, although a fictitious story, is a refusal to mock her Savior, not just a great ethical teacher. However, no prayers are ever addressed to Christ in the ritual.

Where the ritual of the Order becomes troublesome for a Christian is in the discussion of life in the next world. These are made in the context of the rewarding of a virtuous life, not as a result of Christ’s work apprehended in faith. One prayer ends, “And when, one by one, each link shall fall away in death, may the parting be temporary and the meeting eternal. In the world where death comes not, may we realize the full happiness of loving and serving Thee forever.”¹⁵ The OES has its own funeral rite. In this rite, the Matron prays, “May not (the departed sister’s) quickened spirit, freed from its earthly tenement, yet hover around the loved ones here assembled, listen to our words and perceive with clearer vision our every movement.”¹⁶ She continues saying,

“Our Sister’s affection ceases not; therefore may she not now be whispering to grief-stricken hearts, ‘Peace, be still,’ and ‘Lo, I am with you always.’ Think not that the spirit world is distant. Our loved ones, though lost to mortal sight, may still be with us in spiritual existence. Let their loving presence be to us a perpetual inspiration, calling us to a higher moral and spiritual life.”¹⁷

Analysis

There are many Christian trappings in the OES ritual that make it difficult, in some cases, to explain the contradiction between being a member and confessing Christianity. The order teaches benevolence, morality, and virtue: are these not all Christian traits? Are the teachings of the order not taken from Scripture? Are not the words of Jesus, “I am the resurrection and the life,” an integral part of the ritual? In fact, there exists an auxiliary of the OES called the “White Shrine” to which *only* professed Christian can belong.¹⁸ Theodore Graebner, a Missouri Synod professor, writes, “I looked through another book on the *Symbolism of the Eastern Star*, by Mary Anna Slipper, First Grand Secretary of the Grand Chapter of Ontario. She is constantly referring to Jesus as our Lord and as our Savior, who died for us, etc. etc.”

There are two approaches to addressing the inconsistencies between the teachings of the OES and the teaching of Christianity. The first is the method of “guilt by association”: the Masonic Lodge teaches a Deism bordering on paganism, and its teachings are demonstrably anti-Christian. Since the OES is associated with the Lodge, it too must be an anti-Christian organization. The difficulty with this approach is that the female members of the OES only know what Masonry teaches through their husbands, who of course assure them that the Lodge teaches only what the Order teaches. Or, as happens in some cases, the husbands themselves repudiate many of the teachings of the Lodge and maintain membership only to participate in the OES. Such members will point out the British Lodges that forbid members to participate in the OES as a recognition that the two organizations do not share the same teaching.

A second approach is to point out the “works righteousness” teachings of the OES. If the goal of the OES were to improve morality and virtue *for this life only*, one might be able to accept them as a civic organization, part of the Kingdom of the Left. Yet the OES insists on speaking of an afterlife, a spirit world, and the rewards of a good life in the next. In this, the OES has crossed the line from being a mere benevolent fraternal organization to being a religion. Since they choose to speak regarding religion, the Christian has a responsibility to judge their religion against the teaching of Jesus Christ.

In the first place, the OES teaches a Platonic dualism between body and spirit. This world is physical; the next will be purely non-corporeal. This dualism is characteristic of early Christian Gnostic sects, and is a view repudiated clearly in the creeds.^B Furthermore, the place of the loved one in the spiritual world is in no place predicated on Christ’s person or work, therefore denying him his rightful place as Lord and King. In fact, there is not even always a reference to the person’s works having merited them a place in the next world. They are there by virtue of the fact that that is how the world works. On this point alone, it is simply inconsistent, if not impossible, for a Christian to confess Christ as the Savior of the world and also to confess the Platonic dualism and foundationless spirituality of the OES.

Conclusion

This is not to say that the OES member will immediately realize the inconsistency. In fact, there is often a felicitous inconsistency between their OES confession and their Christian faith.^C Perhaps the conclusions of Graebner sum up this difficulty best:

“It may be difficult for a member of the Eastern Star to believe that her ritual is anti-Christian, when it speaks so extensively of Christ in the Martha and Electa sections, when Christian Hymns are sung, etc. We are willing to believe, too, that in some chapters, where there are no Jews, etc., the prayers may close with a reference to Christ, though his name does not occur in the prescribed prayers. But when the hope of heaven is held out to members on the basis of a good moral life, how can they fail to see the anti-Christian character of the Order?”¹⁹

^B “The resurrection of the dead” in the Nicene Creed, “the resurrection of the body” in the Apostles’ Creed, and “all men will rise again with their bodies” according to the Athanasian Creed. *Lutheran Worship*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982.

^C The author has observed this often. The committed Christian usually glosses over the inconsistencies, or fills the OES rites with Christian meaning, or simply goes about giving a Christian witness as well as she is able within the context of the OES.

¹ *History of the Ancient and Honorable Fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons*. (Henry Leonard Stillson, ed. New York: The Fraternity Publishing Company, 1891). 857-858.

² Theodore Graebner. *A Handbook of Organizations*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1948). 61.

³ *History*, 861.

⁴ *History*, 864.

⁵ *History*, 858.

⁶ Graebner, 62.

⁷ *History*, 859.

⁸ William J. Whalen. *Christianity and American Freemasonry*. (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1958). 117.

⁹ *History*, 862.

¹⁰ *History*, 862.

¹¹ *History*, 865.

¹² *The New Ritual of the Order of the Eastern*. The General Grand Chapter of the Order of the Eastern. (Washington, DC: International Eastern Star Temple, 1929.) 69

¹³ *New Ritual*, 70.

¹⁴ *New Ritual*, 78.

¹⁵ *New Ritual*, 71.

¹⁶ *New Ritual*, 148.

¹⁷ *New Ritual*, 148.

¹⁸ *New Ritual*, 117.

¹⁹ *Graebner*, 68.

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