

Catholic Masonry

Since the Papal Bull In Eminenti issued by Clement XII in 1738 Roman Catholics have, in theory at least, been prohibited from becoming Freemasons. Subsequent bulls have extended the ban to Masonically inspired bodies like the Odd Fellows and Knights of Pythias. At times however Papal prohibitions have proved difficult to enforce and such has been the appeal of the fraternal orders that some Catholics have sought to develop acceptable alternatives. Typically these possessed the attractions of brotherhood and ritual but at the same time were established as exclusively Catholic organizations which carefully tip-toed around Papal objections to oath taking and secrecy.

One well known example of a Catholic fraternal organization is the Ancient Order of Hibernians, for Irish Catholics and Catholics of Irish descent. In this article however we will look at another organization, the Knights of Columbus. The Knights of Columbus are particularly interesting because not only were they established explicitly as a Catholic alternative to Freemasonry in the United States but their subsequent development (and that of related organizations) appears to mirror closely the history of American Freemasonry.

The Knights of Columbus were founded in 1882 in New Haven, Connecticut by Father Michael McGiveny. The name was chosen as a reminder that America was discovered by a Catholic. Leaving aside the rather offensive and racist assumptions concerning Columbus's 'discovery' of an already inhabited continent, given that Columbus had set sail in 1492 he could hardly have been a Protestant as the Reformation had not occurred at the time.

The Knights of Columbus has from its origins remained an exclusively male organization, the most famous of the many millions of men to become members over the decades was U.S. President John F. Kennedy.

Mindful of the appeal of Freemasonry the Knights of Columbus organized along similar lines. The Knights were organized into councils akin to lodges. A degree structure mirroring the three basic grades of the Masons was devised. The three principles of the degrees are 1. Charity, 2. Unity and 3. Fraternity.

In 1900 a fourth degree was added. This is known as the Patriotic Degree and its members are organized into Assemblies separate from the councils. Insofar as it was a later appendage to the original three degrees and its members are organized separately, the Patriotic Degree in many ways corresponds to the higher (or 'side') degrees of Freemasonry to which Masons qualify if (among other things) they have first progressed through the initial three degrees. In the case of the Knights of Columbus, a candidate for the Patriotic Degree must have been a Third degree initiate for at least a year before qualifying.

Moreover the Patriotic Degree has a quasi-military character. Members, or Worthy Sir Knights, as they are known, wear uniforms and participate in parades extolling the virtues of patriotism. As such the Patriotic Degree would seem to have some equivalence to the Masonic Knights Templar Degree (the most well known of several extinct Masonic knightly grades). Indeed the Knights Templar is believed to be the inspiration for a host of quasi-military degrees which were created within American Fraternal organizations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Knights of Columbus' Patriotic Degree among them.

The author of the fourth degree ritual of the Knights of Columbus, William Harper Bennet, was subsequently responsible for establishing another Catholic Fraternity called the Order of Alhambra.

If the Knights of Columbus mirror the three basic degrees of Freemasonry plus a rough equivalent to the Masonic Knights Templar degree, then the Order of Alhambra represents a Roman Catholic version of the Shriners.

The Shriners, or Ancient Arabic Order of Nobles of the Mystic Shrine, to give them their full name stand outside of Freemasonry but at the same time (until recently at least) stood at its apex. Only Masons who had attained the York Rite Knights Templar degree or the 32nd degree of the Scottish Rite were eligible for membership.

The Shriners were founded in 1871 by W. J. Florence. The rituals and paraphernalia of the order contain many borrowings from Arab and Islamic culture. The emblem of the Shriners is the Islamic crescent and other symbols used include the sphinx and the pyramid. Initiates are called Nobles and greet each other with the salutation es Selamu Aleikum, Arabic for 'Peace be with you'. Nobles wear a red fez with a black tassel, this has become the single most distinctive mark of the Shriners. The local unit of Shriner organization is the Temple (analogous to a lodge) and all temples are given Arabic names. The first ever Shriner Temple was named 'Mecca'. The officers of each Temple constitute a Divan, the leading officers are titled Potentate and Chief Rabban. The head of the entire order is titled Imperial Potentate who presides over an Imperial Grand Council. A copy of the Quran is used during initiations, a fact probably blasphemous to Muslims and ironic given that the two Masonic bodies through which candidates are required to pass to qualify them for membership of the Shriners are both explicitly Christian.

The Order of Alhambra also uses Arabic (perhaps more properly Moorish) and Islamic terminology albeit in a less ambiguous and more pro-Christian manner. The Order of Alhambra was founded in 1904 and was originally open only to fourth degree initiates of the Knights of Columbus. As with the Knights of Columbus, members are referred to as 'Sir Knights'.

The name of the order derives from the Alhambra Palace in Granada, Spain where the Moors surrendered to the Spanish Conquistadors. To make the point even clearer the emblem of the order is a red castle (the Red Castle of Castile) on top of a crescent, symbolizing the victory of the Spanish Christians over the Moors.

Having asserted the domination of Christians over Muslims the Order of Alhambra then appropriate several aspects of Moorish language and dress and in so doing appear to closely imitate the Shriners. Thus whereas the Shriners wear red fezzes, the Alhambrans wear white ones. Eastern costumes and sets inspired by Moorish themes are used in Alhambran rituals.

The Alhambran equivalent of a Shriner Temple is called a caravan and all caravans have Moorish names. Like the Shriners the Order of Alhambra utilize Moorish Islamic titles for their office holders. The governing body of the order is known as the Supreme Divan which consists of representatives from all the caravans and the Council of Viziers (the supreme officers of the order). In Ottoman turkey the Vizier was the equivalent of a Prime Minister. Caravans are also grouped into regional bodies, each overseen by a Grand Divan.

Just as the Shriners 'dumbed-down' their membership qualifications to accept anyone who was a Master Mason (a reform introduced in 2000) so the Order of Alhambra also evolved a less exclusive admissions policy opening their doors to all Catholic men over the age of eighteen.

Finally both the Shriners and the Order of Alhambra have made charitable works a central aspect of their activity, something the Shriners in particular have become famous for.

Until recently when racial barriers have belatedly begun to fall, American Freemasonry was deeply segregated and had been so for some two hundred years. Paralleling the all-white, state-based Grand Lodges of 'regular' Freemasonry (regular insofar as it was recognized by the fraternity's parent body, the United Grand Lodge of England) was Prince Hall Masonry.

Prince Hall Masonry is named after a man of that name. Prince Hall was an eighteenth century black man who along with fourteen other blacks were initiated into a British military lodge in Boston under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of Ireland. As Prince Hall is usually the only one of the fifteen who is remembered it is worth recounting the names of the others: Cyrus Johnson, Bueston Slinger, Prince Rees, John Canton, Peter Freeman, Benjamin Tiler, Duff Ruform, Thomas Santerson, Prince Rayden, Cato Spain, Boston Smith, Peter Best, Forten Howard and Richard Titley.

As a result of the victory of the colonists in the War of Independence the British Army was forced to leave and their Masonic lodges went with them. Prince Hall and his fellow black Masons were left with a charter conferring certain Masonic rights on them but not the right to initiate others. There were a scattering of other black Masons in the U.S. at the time and these grouped themselves with Prince Hall and his brothers. American Grand Lodges were forming at the time and Massachusetts Grand Lodge resolutely failed to invite the black Masons to affiliate. It thus took until 1784 before a charter allowing for new initiations was acquired. By the late 1790's however African Lodge (as it was known) fell into arrears. Despite attempts to correspond with the Grand Lodge in London, the black Masons were struck off the rolls of recognized lodges (a suspiciously harsh response). In reply, African Lodge declared itself independent and renamed itself African Grand Lodge.

The tendency for the Grand Lodge (and later United Grand Lodge) of England to blow hot and cold towards the Prince Hall Masons was probably the result of the attitudes (racist or enlightened) of the particular officers at the time. This continued well into the 20th century when in 1946 the UGLE first recognized Prince Hall masonry as regular and then within twelve months withdrew the recognition.

Whilst Prince Hall Masonry was born, in great part, out of racial discrimination amongst white Freemasons, so the Catholic Knights of Peter Claver were born out of similar prejudices that existed within the Knights of Columbus. The Knights of Peter Claver was founded in Alabama in 1909 by four Josephite Fathers (Conrad Rebeshier, John Dorsey, Samuel Kelly, and Joseph van Baast) and three laymen (Gilbert Faustina, Frank Collins and Frank Trenier) in response to a colour bar operating within the local council of the Knights of Columbus, both Collins and Trenier were black. The Knights are named after a 17th century Catholic missionary who worked among the slaves of South America.

The Knights of Peter Claver have modeled themselves on the Knights of Columbus initially with a structure of three degrees (a fourth was added in 1917) and

members organized into councils. This mirroring was not dissimilar to the way Prince Hall Masonry modeled itself on 'regular' Freemasonry in time developing a degree structure which incorporated many of the 'higher' degree systems of Freemasonry like the Royal Arch, the thirty three degree Scottish Rite and the Knights Templar.

Because of their origins the Knights of Peter Claver became and remained a predominantly black organization, whites have, however always been welcomed and currently make up about a quarter of the membership. The organization also crosses the gender divide with membership open to women.

As racism has been weaned out of the Knights of Columbus co-operation between the two Catholic fraternities has increased. A not dissimilar development has occurred in the relationship between Freemasonry and Prince Hall Masonry with many American (and some foreign) Grand Lodges now recognizing Prince Hall Masons as legitimate.

So, just as Freemasonry developed higher degrees including a chivalric quasi-military degree so too did the Knights of Columbus. Just as Freemasonry spawned an autonomous order based on an Arabic theme so too did the Knights of Columbus, and finally, just as racism within Freemasonry prompted the rise of a black alternative so the racism of the Knights of Columbus spawned a non-racist inclusive alternative.