

Keynote Address

Tolerance: Towards A Pluralistic Society Guided by Love for Creation and Performance of Masonry

by Karim-Aly Kassam

**Masonic Spring Workshop, Kananaskis
April 30th at 8:00 PM**

Note: The keynote address was preceded by a recitation of the Charge from the 29th Degree — Knights of St. Andrew of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite, beautifully performed by Ill Bro John Alexander. This degree emphasizes the Masonic teachings of equality and toleration. We are reminded that no one man, no one Church, no one religion, has a monopoly of truth; that while we must be true and faithful to our own convictions, we must respect the opinions of others.

Brethren:

Let me begin by telling you how honoured and privileged I consider myself to be among you. Fifteen years ago when I became a Mason, I never dreamt that I would stand in front of my fellow Brethren from all over Alberta, and possibly beyond, to lead a discussion on one of the most serious issues affecting humanity in the 21st Century; that is the concepts of tolerance, diversity and pluralism. We are in danger of losing these fundamental values that are key to all life on earth.

Let me begin by congratulating Brother Alexander for an *inspiring* recitation of the Charge on Tolerance of the 29th Degree of Freemasonry. You know the word *inspire* comes from the Greek, meaning “to put a soul into something”; “to give life.” You certainly gave life to this *charge*.

Brethren, I deliberately used the word *inspire* with the word *charge*. The word has a particular meaning. For instance, putting a charge *in* a load of powder. It also carries the idea of placing responsibility, a load onto someone, this is the fundamental meaning here. It is a commitment that a Mason makes. To take that load, that *charge*, and to give it life. To be committed to a responsibility. In this case, the responsibility is the idea of tolerance, or more accurately, as I will argue in a moment, it is really about Love.

We live in times where tolerance, diversity, and pluralism are not just

ideals to strive for but practical necessities, in fact, urgent for the survival of humanity and all life on this planet. Now considering the fact that we have such a **charge** of the 29th Degree tells us something. It tells us that Freemasons before us had seen the necessity of these values a long time ago. They displayed an element of foresight, looking into the future on the basis of history. Having foreseen, our ancestors asked their descendants in the Brotherhood to act in a particular manner and to act wisely. This **charge**, like all **charges** for a Freemason, is a commitment and a responsibility. Furthermore, it demands action because it demands a particular form of behaviour.

I would like to explore some of the key ideas contained in this charge by asking questions. I am going to ask:

- Why use the word “handmaid”?
- Is this charge really about tolerance or something more fundamental?
- Does this mean that in the name of Tolerance we accept everything?
- How is this **Charge** a call to action?

And by asking these questions I hope the answer to the question: how can Masonic values drive a pluralistic society?

Why Handmaid?

Notice that the charge says “Masonry is the handmaiden of religion.” It is not a replacement for religion. It is complementary to religion as if completing it. So if we are Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, an Aboriginal Person, then it enhances our religiosity, our spiritual awareness, it supposed to make us a better Muslim, a better Jew, a better Buddhist, a better Hindu, a better Christian... a better human being.

Now why specifically use the word “handmaid.” We know it connotes service, to be a servant of. The primacy of religion is not compromised, the primacy of the belief in the Creator is not only upheld, but we are told that Freemasonry **serves** religion. Why not use the word “servant” or “butler”? Why use the feminine “handmaid”? Why refer to Masonry as “she”? Well think of the subject, this **charge** not only speaks of tolerance, it speaks of love. The feminine is associated with sensitive, with nurturing, with life-giving. Our Brethren saw Freemasonry, when they wrote this **charge**, as the lover of religion, taming the coarseness of religion, giving religion its humanity. The language of the feminine achieves this because it is about love and life. It is in truth about **Love** for all life.

Is the Charge really about Tolerance or something else?

We call this a **charge** of Tolerance. But does this charge really talk about tolerance. It says:

This degree is much devoted to Toleration, and it inculcates in the strongest manner that greater leading idea of the ancient art — that

a belief in the one true God, and a moral and virtuous life, constitute the only religious requisites needed to enable a man to be a Mason.

I would like to come back to the word “inculcate” later — please keep it mind. However, back to the question: Is the Charge really about tolerance?

Here is what the *charge* also says:

The true Mason loves not only his kindred and his country, but all mankind; not only the good, but also the evil among his brethren.

Brethren, I submit to you this *charge* is really about Love and not Tolerance.

Let me quote again:

*The Masonic system regards all the human race as members of one great family — as having the same origin and the same destination; all distinctions of rank, lineage, or nativity, are alike unknown. It requires the acknowledgment of the existence of the Grand Master of the Universe, and to reverence his great and sacred name, irrespective of sectarian ideas; in a word, to practice every virtue which adorns and ennobles the human character, and fly every vice which sullies and degrades it. It **inculcates** a generous love for all mankind, it matters not for what religious creed.*

The Mason is *charged* with serving the Creator, and this service begins with the love of humanity. I repeat, the *charge* tells us in order to serve your Creator you will first have to love humanity. This is what a good Mason would do. This is his *charge*, his responsibility, his orders, his duty, his guiding principles.

Brethren when I say: “I will tolerate you.” — this is necessary for a diverse and pluralistic society. But the Freemason has to Love humanity, the Mason shows compassion rather than just to tolerate. The Freemason loves all of God’s creation.

Now again we see this word “inculcate”: “It [meaning Freemasonry] **inculcates** a generous love for all mankind.” Again keep this word in mind, I want to return to it.

Does this mean in the name of Tolerance we accept everything?

While the charge does not tell us directly what things not to tolerate, it is very clear because it tells what our values are. Belief in the Creator is central, but that is not enough. While asking us to love humanity, it tells us that this love means specifically to love truth, to love justice and to love generosity. It asks us to live an ethical and self-faithful life. This means we should be intolerant of injustice. Love of humanity for the Freemason does not mean that anything goes. In fact, by listing our responsibilities, or our

charge, we are also being told what to be intolerant of.

This *charge* is critical of a world inflicted by intolerance. It speaks of the intolerance of religious opinions. So who among us who will be the first to throw the stone? The *charge* warns the Mason against judging another human. It argues that “God is the only magistrate that can rightfully decide as judge.” All right, if we are to defer to the Creator, what are we supposed to do? After all a *charge* is about action, it gives us orders on *how* to behave. Brethren we do not judge another human being by their creed or colour, we decide by actions.

The good Mason does that which is good which comes in his way, from a love of duty, and not merely because a law enacted by man or God commands his will to do it. Not in vain does the poor or oppressed look up to him.

I repeat: “Not in vain does the poor or oppressed look up to him.”

How is this *charge* a call to action?

Here is where I want to come back to the word “inculcate”. Brethren there are a number of ways of knowing something. One way of knowing is: knowing *that*. For example we know *that* the Capitol of Canada is Ottawa. *That* the Calgary Flames are the best hockey Team. (I thought that I would just slip it in.) We know *that* Iraq is Country with diverse ethnicities and interpretations of Islam. Now how do we learn *that*? How do we gain this type of knowledge? This type of knowledge is *imparted*. It is given, like book learning.

But Freemasonry is not about knowing *that*; it is about knowing *how*. Knowing *how* is another way of knowing. It is experiential — it is related to action and to behaviour. It goes back to the root of the word “knowledge” — *gnosis*. *Gnosis* relates to direct experience, it is also related to spiritual or mystical experience. This is why we are called Masons, this is why we refer to the Creator as the Grand Architect or the Grand Geometrician. These words for the Creator reflect the practical nature of our Craft. Our knowledge is not *imparted*, it is *inculcated*. It is experiential, it is performative, it is about action. That is why we have an *Entered Apprentice*, a *Fellowcraft*, and a *Master Mason*. This is *how* we pass knowledge down from one generation to another. We are about knowing *how* and we *inculcate* this knowledge.

Let me quote from the *charge* itself:

The best, and, indeed, the only good Mason, is he who, with the power of labour, does the work of life — the upright mechanic, merchant or farmer — the man who exercises the power of thought, of justice, or of love — whose whole life is one great act of performance of Masonic duty. The natural work of Masonry is practical life, the use of all the faculties in their proper spheres and

for their natural functions. Love of truth, justice, and generosity, as attributes of God, must appear in a life marked by these qualities.

Knowing **that** is a passive affair, but knowing **how**, which is what Masonry is about, is a dynamic affair, it is about action. Brethren, our Craft is about knowing **how**, it is a way of life, our actions and intentions are one. As Christ would say, we teach “by witness.” It is through our actions we demonstrate our values, we do not just talk about them. Brethren, talk is cheap. To **receive** good is to be human, to **do** good is to be a Freemason, to **be** good is divine. We strive to **be** good through our actions. This skill is our Craft, it is knowing **how**, it is **inculcated**.

There are great wrongs and evils in domestic, social, and public life, to be righted and outgrown. Masonry cannot in our age forsake the broad way of life; she must journey on in the open street, appear in the crowded square, and teach men by her deeds — her life — more eloquent than any lips.

Tomorrow morning I want to talk about how diversity is essential to our humanity, to our biological and cultural survival. That diversity and the values of pluralism inform our spirituality. Without diversity and pluralism, our spiritual, biological, and cultural well-being are in peril. In my third and final presentation in the afternoon I want talk about how in Masonry and in Canadian society we need a quiet but effective revolution. Masonry needs to lead that revolution. But before Freemasonry can do that she must remind herself of her roots and her responsibilities.

This evening with the help of Brother Alexander, I have tried to show that the tolerance **charge** is really a call to action — action to serve the Creator. This service can only be achieved by loving humanity and all of creation. This kinship with humanity needs to be extended to all life. It is really about Love. However, this love does not mean everything goes. We need to be intolerant of injustice, greed, hypocrisy — cruelty of all kinds. We do not judge people by their creed or colour, we evaluate actions — just as our actions must be guided by love, self-truth, generosity, and justice. It is through our actions we teach others, by our ethical way of life. We do not presume to judge.

Brethren the **charge** has been given. Whether we have passed the 29th Degree or not, the **charge** has been given.

Now we know!

Once we know, we become responsible!

Brethren to whom much is given, much is expected!