

FRATERNAL ORDER OF EAGLES

The Fraternal Order of Eagles (FOE) was founded by six theater owners in Seattle, Washington, in February 1898. The organization originally called itself “The Order of Good Things,” but a few weeks later chose the Bald Eagle as its official emblem and changed its name to “The Fraternal Order of Eagles.” In April 1898 the order formed a “Grand Aerie” (term now designating the national organization¹), secured a charter, framed a constitution and by-laws, and elected a president (John Cort).²

Social activities were central in early years, but as the organization grew it began to focus on service to society and also became a lobbying force for change in the political realm (e.g., old age pensions, opposition to child labor laws and discrimination in the work place). According to the Preamble of its Constitution, the FOE’s purpose is “to unit fraternally for mutual benefit, protection, improvement, social enjoyment and association...and to promote the general welfare.”³ Under the general theme “People Helping People,” the FOE’s Mission Statement reads as follows:

The Fraternal Order of Eagles, an international non-profit organization, unites fraternally in the spirit of liberty, truth, justice, and equality, to make human life more desirable by lessening its ills, and by promoting peace, prosperity, gladness and hope.⁴

In its explication of this statement the FOE describes in general terms its service activities, which are intended to “uphold and nourish values of Home, Family and Community”⁵:

The Fraternal Order of Eagles was founded in 1898 and since that time has given over a hundred million dollars to local and national charities ranging from buying school supplies for homeless children to the over one million dollars that has been donated to the St. Jude Children’s Research center. We support our armed forces, police and firefighters and others who protect and serve us. We fund research in areas such as Heart Disease, Kidney Disease, Diabetes and Cancer. We help raise money for neglected and abused children and for the aged.⁶

The Constitution of the Fraternal Order of Eagles requires that no person⁷ is eligible for membership “unless such person is of good moral character, and believes in the existence of a Supreme Being....and is over twenty-one years of age.” In addition, no person is eligible for membership “if he is a member of or in any way connected or affiliated with the Communist

¹According to *Miriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, an “aerie” (first meaning) is “the nest of a bird on a cliff or a mountaintop.”

²<http://www.foe.com/history/history.html>, 1.

³www.nyaerie.org/files/documents/FOEArticlesofIncorporation2006.doc

⁴<http://www.foe.com/>, 1.

⁵<http://www.foe.com/history/who.html>, 1.

⁶*Ibid.*, 1-2. The FOE has sponsored such endeavors as the Art Ehrmann Cancer Fund, Max Bear Heart Fund, Jimmy Durante Children’s Fund, “Doc” Dunlap Kidney Fund, and the Diabetes Fund.

⁷The local Aerie of the FOE typically has an all-male membership, while its Auxiliary typically has an all-female membership. Historically, the FOE has followed a male-only membership policy, but in recent years, due to various court cases, membership has been opened to females—a matter to be decided by each local Aerie. According to one source, the National FOE allowed women as full members from 1995 to 1998, but reverted back to its male-only policy (www.aclu.org/womensrights/discrim/20103prs20050712.html).

Party, or who believes in or advocates the overthrow” of the government (Section 70.2).⁸ Two kinds of membership are offered, beneficial⁹ and non-beneficial. No one becomes a member “until properly initiated in accordance with the Rituals of the Order” (Section 70.2a). The Order offers no “social memberships.”

Ritual of the Order

Opening Ceremony. The Opening Ceremony for FOE meetings consists mainly of a review of the duties of various officers. The Grand Worthy Chaplain (who is responsible for conducting all “devotional exercises” of the Aerie), for example, describes his duty: “To ask in the name of all, the guidance of God, to urge that wisdom mark all our deliberations, and to insist that Justice be measured out impartially.”¹⁰ The Bible is laid upon the Altar with these words: “This is the Bible. Its pages contain the wisdom of the ages and its teachings are founded on the everlasting laws of Truth.”¹¹ The Chaplain presents a prayer “offering” asking God’s favor on the work of the Aerie and presenting the “wish” for mutual assistance among the members. The prayer reads, in part:

If we are loyal and true unto ourselves, we shall be loyal and true to our Brothers. If we give Justice to all men, we ourselves shall be better for it. If we believe all men equal in Thy eyes, we shall be the more worthy of Thy loving care. Help us, Almighty God, to live toward the betterment of our own lives and to be worthy of the ideals of this Order. Amen.¹²

Closing Ceremony. The Closing Ceremony includes a brief prayer. The assembly speaks in unison the Eagles’ motto, while the Junior Past Worthy President, the Worthy Chaplain, and the Worthy Vice-President “shall each stretch forth his right hand and touch the Bible with the tips of his fingers.” The motto is: “If I cannot speak well of any Eagle, I will not speak ill of him.”¹³

Initiatory Ritual. The “Ceremony of Initiation” introduces the candidates before the Altar where they pledge to devote their best efforts to the upholding of the teachings of the Order, which, they are promised, “will in no way conflict with any civic or religious duty.”¹⁴ The candidates affirm their belief in the existence of a “Supreme Being” and take the “Obligation” “before God and on my honor.” They promise to keep passwords and Rituals of the Order confidential, obey the laws, rules, and regulations of the Order, support its projects and ideals, and in various ways show respect and honor for Brothers and their families. The Obligation ends with this affirmation:

I understand the meaning of these pledges and ask my God and my Brothers to help me keep them. I know that the wilful violation of any of them is just cause for expulsion from the Order....I do accept them and I will observe them, so help me God.¹⁵

⁸www.nyaerie.org/files/documents/FOEArticlesofIncorporation2006.doC.

⁹Beneficial members are entitled to sick and death benefits (*Ibid.*, Section 71.2).

¹⁰*The Official Ritual of the Local Aries—Fraternal Order of Eagles*, 1961, 11.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 14. See www.phoenixmasonry.org/masonicmuseum/fraternalism/eagles.htm, 7-8. Also, www.stichtingargus.nl/vrijmetselarij/foe_r.html

¹²*Ibid.*, 15-16. See www.phoenixmasonry.org/masonicmuseum/fraternalism/eagles.htm, 8.

¹³*Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 33-34.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 35. See www.phoenixmasonry.org/masonicmuseum/fraternalism/eagles.htm, 12.

The chaplain offers prayer in behalf of the candidates, and an obligatory Ode is sung, in which the candidates are reminded that they come “before This Altar to be bound” with the Brothers of the Order “In vows forevermore.”¹⁶

Candidates are conducted to the various stations of the Lodge, where they hear the virtues of Liberty, Truth, Justice, and Equality extolled. Prior to the final procedural instructions that conclude the initiation, the Worthy President of the Lodge declares:

The few years that you call life pass swiftly as the shooting of a star across the midnight sky. Your earthly hopes and strivings end at the grave. No matter with what honors life may clothe you, you must go naked to the Throne of God. At times your lot seems hard and the burden so heavy that you grow weary; but struggle on manfully, for, when you reach this goal, you shall enjoy eternal rest....Uncounted years will change your body into dust....Wealth and poverty, pride and humility, greed and charity, alike must pass this way—but beyond is God! This equality at the grave is the lesson that Death teaches, and the man who learns it early in life, early finds happiness in knowledge.¹⁷

Memorial Service. The Memorial Service, which every local Aerie “must conduct” annually, speaks of death as “eternal sleep” and “the enduring sleep of death, which is the new waking into life eternal.”¹⁸ Before the altar and open Bible the Worthy Chaplain offers a prayer asking the blessing and mercy of “Almighty and Eternal God” on the Brothers and the families of the deceased of the former years. The Junior Pastor Worthy President addresses the assembly, saying, “We gather to pay tribute to those who have passed into the Grand Aerie of Heaven....”¹⁹

The Secretary calls the rolls of those who have died during the year, after which the assembly sings “Nearer, My God, To Thee.” The Chaplain goes before the altar and open Bible to pray, concluding with the words, “May this memorial make us appreciate our God-given mission and live up to the noble ideals of our Great Brotherhood. Amen.”²⁰

“The Final Tribute to Deceased Members,” or funeral ceremony—the time and place of which is subject to the wishes of the family of the deceased—assures those present of the following:

It is a time-honored custom in our Fraternity that amid the busy turmoil of this life we pause to note the departure of our Brothers. Yet, it is not a final parting. The Fraternal Order of Eagles teaches that we shall meet again, and that the tender associations of life are broken only to be reunited. Whether we look into the living eyes of those we love or gaze upon the placid faces of our dead, love divine comforts us with the blessed assurance that this relation is eternal.²¹

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 37. See www.phoenixmasonry.org/masonicmuseum/fraternalism/eagles.htm, 13.

¹⁷www.phoenixmasonry.org/masonicmuseum/fraternalism/eagles.htm, 16. See *The Official Ritual*, 43-44.

¹⁸*The Official Ritual*, 67-68.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 69.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 72.

²¹<http://www.foe.com/nebraska/finaltribute.htm>, 1-2. *Final Tribute To Deceased Members of The Local Aeries of The Fraternal Order of Eagles*, Issued by Authority of The Grand Aerie Fraternal Order of Eagles, 1. Though issued “by Authority of The Grand Aerie Fraternal Order of Eagles,” the funeral ceremony or service is not itself included in the official ritual book of the Order.

The Worthy President declares concerning the deceased,

He believed in the existence of a Supreme Being, the Father of us all, giver of every good and perfect gift, and in this believe he died in the hope of a blessed immortality beyond the grave. He bore the trials of life and fought its battles, till tired and weary of the struggle, he fell asleep. For him eternal rest remains.²²

The Worthy President then adds,

“There is no death;
 The stars go down
 To rise upon some fairer shore
 And bright in Heaven’s jeweled crown
 They Shine forevermore.”²³

A Chaplain’s prayer then asks “Our Father in Heaven...the resurrection and the life” to take to himself the soul of the departed, and asks that all present be filled “with the hope of a blessed immortality.”²⁴ The Worthy President addresses the assembly, and the Chaplain offers another prayer which concludes with the words,

Help us to realize that the parting is only for a short season, and that we shall meet again in the Grand Aerie beyond, where the faults and frailties of this earthly life are forgotten, and all become perfect in the love of an Infinite God. Amen.²⁵

The “Ceremony at the Grave,” to be given only at the grave, begins with a prayer by the Worthy President. This prayer reads, in part, “We beseech Thee, Almighty God to be gracious unto our departed Brother, who leaves now this earthly sphere to live in the realm of Eternity....” The Worthy President deposits earth in the grave with the words, “Brothers, the dust has returned to earth, and the spirit to God, who gave it. Have mercy on us, O Lord.”²⁶

Evaluation of the Religious Content of the Rituals²⁷

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) objects to membership in the Fraternal Order of Eagles on the basis of the religious elements contained in the Order’s official rituals and ceremonies. The LCMS recognizes that the Order respects the personal religious convictions of its members. Moreover, the LCMS understands that the Order, in spite of the religious aspects that pervade its rituals,²⁸ does not regard itself as a “religion” according to the usual understanding of this term. Similar to many other civic groups, the Order throughout its history

²²*Ibid.*, 2. *Final Tribute*, 2.

²³*Ibid.* *Final Tribute*, 2-3.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 2-3. *Final Tribute*, 4.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 4. *Final Tribute*, 5-6.

²⁶*Ibid.* *Final Tribute*, 6.

²⁷For general background regarding the LCMS’ historic position on lodges, see: <http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/Lodge.pdf>

²⁸At the center of its rituals and ceremonies is an altar and a Bible, and integral to them are prayers, hymns, and biblical references and allusions. Religious themes and concepts such as eternal life, heaven, “brotherhood,” the required belief in a Supreme Being, etc. combine to form the overtly religious context of the joint activities engaged in by members when they gather.

has sponsored and supported worthy endeavors in the social and political realm, and it has espoused and promoted moral principles that contribute to the betterment of society. Yet, its mandatory Ritual contains a religious philosophy which, from the theological perspective of the LCMS, is incompatible with the Christian's confession of faith. The Ritual binds its members (in a "brotherhood") by solemn oath, in the name of and before a "Supreme Being," to religious principles²⁹ that fundamentally conflict with the biblical faith.

In its rituals and ceremonies the Order goes beyond the mere acknowledgement of the existence of God. Assumed and even expressed is the belief that the God addressed as "Almighty and Eternal God" hears the prayers of all who call upon Him, by whatever name they chose to call upon Him (hence the generic reference to "a Supreme Being"). The Scriptures teach, however, that the true God has revealed Himself in the person of His one and only Son Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1) and that only through faith in Christ does God the Father answer the prayers of those who come to Him ((John 14:6, 13-14). Nowhere in the rituals of the FOE is the name of Jesus Christ even mentioned. This presumably would be offensive to those who, for example, could not accept the biblical truth that Jesus "is the image of the invisible God" in whom "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" and through whom alone "we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col.1:13-14, 15, 19-20). But Christians are required to confess boldly and without compromise—and gladly so—the truth that is in Jesus (Eph. 4:21; Rom. 10:9; Matt. 10:32-33), who is the sole Mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5).

The Order also assumes and even holds out the hope that all of its members who embrace and follow its noble ideals will receive God's blessing of eternal life—"blessed immortality" in "the realm of Eternity," as the Order's Ritual puts it. Its members are referred to as a "Great Brotherhood" that will experience a reunion in eternity in God's presence, "the Grand Aerie of heaven."³⁰ Such a religious philosophy conflicts sharply with the central and foundational truth of Christianity that eternal life can be obtained only through faith in Jesus Christ (John 3:16-18; 6:68). The Scriptures unambiguously declare that "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Such faith in Jesus Christ binds Christians together in the "one, holy Christian church." Any teaching, explicit or implicit, that human beings can have eternal life or belong to the fellowship of believers on the basis of an individual's moral conduct must be regarded as contrary to the scriptural Gospel (Rom. 3:28; Eph. 2:8-9; Gal. 1:6-9). Only those who believe in and confess Jesus Christ (Rom. 10:9-10) can have the hope of salvation and join the company of saints in heaven (the church triumphant).

This is not to pass judgment on the personal faith of any individual who is a member of this organization, for only God can look into the heart to see whether saving faith in Christ exists. But the above evaluation does consider membership in this organization to involve an unacceptable compromise of biblical truth and its faithful confession.

²⁹In its Memorial Service the Order speaks of "divine principles which are carved in the corner-stone of the Order." *The Official Ritual*, 70.

³⁰*The Official Ritual*, 69.