

Rosicrucians, True and False

by

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In theory, at least, there should be currently vast numbers of Rosicrucians scattered around the world, for the search engine Google gives some 330,000 results for ‘Rosicrucians’ and almost ten times as many – 3,200,000 – for ‘Rosicrucianism’. But would-be Rosicrucians appearing on the internet are necessarily self-selected; there is no uniformity of self-perception, description or belief; and the variety of meanings given to the words ‘Rosicrucian’ and ‘Rosicrucian’ are both bewildering and often contradictory. It does not follow that any of them will correspond to what we, as Rosicrucian masons, perceive ‘real’ Rosicrucians to be.

But how do *we* interpret these words ? It is not so simple a task as we may think. Were, and are, the Rosicrucians ‘fanatics’ holding ‘the most crude and incomprehensible notions’ (as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* maintained in the mid 19th century); were they simply ‘Lutheran disciples of Paracelsus ... intemperate in their language (and) rabid in their religious prejudices (as a youthful A.E. Waite described them); or perhaps, in the words of the online Wikipedia, they were ‘a legendary and secretive Order dating from the 15th or 17th century’, the consciousness of whose Adepts is ‘said to be like that of demi-gods’ ? Both Hargrave Jennings and Franz Hartmann subscribed to this view of Rosicrucian adepts as superhuman, but do not let us flatter ourselves, for how many of us can truly claim to be adepts at anything other than the creation of grandiose ranks and regalia ?

All of these perceptions we may set aside, but before we come on to the real nature of Rosicrucianism, let us clear away the clutter of false history. Our masonic/Rosicrucian predecessors had some odd ideas about our origins. Wynn Westcott believed that the ‘Rosicrucians were [themselves] descended from the Egyptian Mysteries’ (as did, and do, the leaders of AMORC), while George Plummer, the first head of the non-masonic *Societas Rosicruciana in America*, thought that Rosicrucianism was ‘the Renaissance of an ancient world-religion far antedating even that of the Egyptians’. And if we are a religion, then of what kind ? For some evangelicals Rosicrucianism is not so much an ancient religion as a false one, drawn from a variety of traditions, and seeking to ‘blend all other existing religions into itself’¹.

These visions of our history and faith have one thing in common: they are all false. What, then, is the truth ? The Rosicrucians first appeared, or rather were announced, in 1614 when the *Fama Fraternitatis*, the first of a series of pamphlets, setting out the foundation myth, history and aims of the Rosicrucian fraternity, was published at Kassel in Germany. This was followed in 1615 by a second manifesto, the *Confessio*, and a year later by a romantic allegory of the alchemical process, the *Chymische Hochzeit* [Chemical Wedding] of Christian Rosencreutz, the hero of the *Fama*. The contents of these three texts give us a clear picture of the ethos of Rosicrucianism and of its purpose.

¹¹ G.A. Mather & L.A. Nichols, *Dictionary of Cults, Sects, Religions and the Occult*. Grand Rapids, 1993

The *Fama* sets out the story of Frater C.R.C. – the mythical Christian Rosencreutz who was the supposed founder of the Fraternity – recounting his life, his mission and the substance of his theoretical and practical approaches to Christian spirituality, while the *Confessio* presents his doctrines in the form of a controversial *apologia* and a polemic against the Roman Church. The *Chemical Wedding* has a different aim: it is not concerned with material alchemy, but with the spiritual processes by which the soul is regenerated and attains the goal of divine union. It should also be noted that the story of Christian Rosencreutz, his travels, his community and his marvellous tomb, is not intended to be taken as factual history. It, too, should be seen as an allegory, either of the life of Christ or of the ideal imitation of His life.

The speculative, non-religious elements of the *Fama* – alchemical, astrological, hermetic and number symbolism – all fall within the compass of Christian esotericism, while the everyday activities of the members of the Rosicrucian community described in the text – celibate lives, an absence of pomp and circumstance, and a dedication to healing the sick – are those of true followers of Christ's commands to love God and to love one's neighbour as oneself. In their essence all three texts are unquestionably wholly and solely Christian in tone, avowedly Trinitarian and, in the case of *Fama* and *Confessio*, decidedly Protestant.

What little we know of the authors supports this view. Although only one of them has been certainly identified – Johann Valentin Andreae, a prominent Lutheran theologian who wrote the *Chemical Wedding* – the manifestos were produced within a circle of Lutheran Pietists active at Tübingen in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. The symbolism they employed in the texts was Christian but used in a novel way. The very word 'Rosicrucian' is derived from the conjoining of the Rose and the Cross, both associated with the life of Christ. The rose is typically emblematic of the Blessed Virgin Mary, but when impaled upon the Latin or Calvary Cross, as it appears in Rosicrucian iconography, it is a specific emblem of Christ's resurrection, just as the Cross alone is a symbol of our redemption through His crucifixion. What is especially significant is that it is not found as a conjoined emblem in this form before its appearance in these Rosicrucian texts. And there is more. As Lutheran theologians the unknown authors of the manifestos were familiar with Martin Luther's personal seal: a cross impaled upon a heart within a rose. A slightly different, but related image, and with the same symbolic meaning.

All of this may seem to labour the point, but it is important to demonstrate and to emphasise the essentially Christian nature of Rosicrucian thought, morality and spirituality. There is one apparent difficulty that the more perceptive may have noticed. These Lutheran theologians were also, as is clear from the *Fama*, followers of Paracelsus. Does this mean that they saw alchemy purely in material terms and that the symbolism of the Chemical Wedding is concerned not with spiritual regeneration but with material transmutation? No, it does not. Paracelsus was primarily a physician, and Rosicrucian brethren are enjoined to heal the sick – and that gratis – as well as to seek their path to God. In other words, they are to give freely as they have freely received.

So we can now begin to see both what Rosicrucianism is – a systematic approach to the spiritual regeneration of society – and what each Rosicrucian should truly be: a professing Trinitarian Christian, practising true charity by healing the sick (in the broadest sense of healing body, mind or spirit) and seeking to probe the mysteries of creation in every aspect.

Here you may begin to question the propriety of orthodox Christians seeking to gain secret or hidden knowledge. But freemasons are enjoined to study the mysteries of nature, and there is

no conflict between faith and knowledge, for increasing our understanding of both the material and spiritual worlds will not lead us to any revelation of new doctrines that might undermine or contradict our faith. Just as our growing knowledge of the physical universe increases our understanding of the laws by which it is governed, so our exploration of the spiritual universe enriches our experience of the things of the spirit. Thus can we, as Rosicrucians grounded in the manifestos, gain from the study and practice of spiritual alchemy, and of other elements of Christian esotericism, a deeper understanding of our personal, inner experience of Christ, and a greater ability to communicate to others the nature and content of such experience. We do not return from such explorations with new or strange doctrines that will distort or overthrow the essentials of the Christian faith.

This is all very well, but you may ask whether or not we should remain fixed in the pattern of life and thought proposed by the *Fama*, a difficult and contentious text written four hundred years ago. And if we should move beyond it, how and why may we do so ?

The original Rosicrucians, whether they were purely literary or really did found a community, were children of their time. They were devout Christians dedicated to a life of practical piety, but they were also prey to the fears and anxieties of a continent torn apart by wars of religion. As Lutherans they were suspicious of an hostile to the Church of Rome, which they perceived as both a political and theological enemy. We are not in that state of fear and we should recognise that true Rosicrucians are also true Christians and may be members of any Church that professes the essentials of the Christian faith: belief in God as creator and sustainer of all that is; perceived by us as a Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit; belief in redemption through the life, death and resurrection of Christ; and in the efficacy of divine grace. [Here I should add that I am well aware that this is a very simple outline, but I trust that it will suffice for all save diehard theological nitpickers]

I make this point about doctrine to emphasise that Rosicrucianism does not, or should not involve either ‘pick and mix’ Christianity, with the cherries left in and the wormwood left out, or an eclectic New Age syncretism that absorbs incompatible and contradictory doctrines and happily believes far more than six impossible things before breakfast. The founding Rosicrucians were grounded in Christian spirituality and also drew upon the traditions of Christian esotericism of the Renaissance and earlier – which traditions were and still are fully compatible with the Christian faith. They were not, and this must be emphasised, either the heirs of a secret, pre-Christian wisdom religion, or the superhuman progenitors of a new Gnosticism. Nor were they, in any sense, magicians. And all this I make as an *ex cathedra* proclamation, permitting no exceptions and no indulgence !

There is, however, one area in which we may differ from them fundamentally. The community of Christian Rosenkreuz was solely of men and bachelors at that. I do not believe that we need to be so restricted. None of us would, I hope, believe that either the sex or marital status of human beings has a bearing on their faith. We happily accept married men as Rosicrucians, and we may equally accept women also (though not, necessarily, as full members of a Rosicrucian body restricted to regular freemasons). So, at last, we can state in general terms the features of the true Rosicrucian and the implications for his or her activities, all of which are either explicitly or implicitly laid down in the manifestos.

He or she must be a professing and practising Trinitarian Christian, a student of Christian esotericism, and active in applying the fruits of such study in teaching or in healing (in its broadest sense). To this I should add what the true Rosicrucian is *not*. He or she must not

profess a non-Christian faith nor engage in material or spiritual activities contrary to Christian doctrine and morality. This does not, of course, preclude the study of other faiths, or of esoteric beliefs and practices – nor does it imply an form of personal spiritual superiority.

With all this in mind, it may now be helpful to review past forms of Rosicrucianism to separate the wheat from the chaff, the true from the false.

We know of no certain Rosicrucian institutions of the 17th century, although many esotericists and proto-freemasons had, or claimed to have, Rosicrucian associations: Elias Ashmole, Robert Fludd, Thomas Vaughan and Sir David Lindsay (Lord Balcarres) in Britain (John Heydon I exclude as a rogue); Michael Maier, Montfaucon de Villars in Europe, will serve as examples. In the 1690s Rosicrucian and Behmenist ideas and ideals were taken to America by the German Pietists who settled in Pennsylvania, and Kelpius's community on the Wissahickon was almost certainly the first true Rosicrucian body in the New World.

Then came Freemasonry as we know it. In the early 18th century claims were made, utterly without provable foundation as it happens, that Freemasonry had grown out of Rosicrucianism. And hard on the heels of this idea came the association of both with alchemy, when Sigmund Richter's Order of the Gold and Rosy Cross underwent a masonic transformation in the 1750s. This Order developed into a fully fledged Rosicrucian institution and produced the *Secret Symbols of the Rosicrucians* [*Geheime Figuren der Rosenkreuzers*, 1784-88], a magnificent collection of Rosicrucian, alchemical and apocalyptic imagery. In the final years of the century Rosicrucianism was brought to England by Sigmund Bacstrom, who received his initiation from the Comte du Chazal on the island of Mauritius. His record of this even is remarkable in that Chazal specifically numbered women among famous Rosicrucians.

Significant advances in self-styled 'Rosicrucian' bodies came during the middle decades of the 19th century. Masonic Rosicrucian bodies began in Scotland in the 1850s, passing to England in 1867 with the foundation of the *Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia*, and to America in the 1880s. These were, however, essentially study societies with an added progressive ritual structure, absent from the manifestos, based upon the grades of the long defunct Order of the Gold and Rosy Cross. Initially such bodies demanded adherence to the Trinitarian Christian faith, but other societies and Orders sprang up that made no such demands and reflected a growing desire for syncretism on the part of occultists who wished to retain the name of Rosicrucians without the commitment to the Christian faith.

This drift away from the true nature of the Rosicrucianism of the manifestos has continued ever since, and we see it in Max Heindel's Rosicrucian Fellowship, in Spencer Lewis's AMORC, in Rijkenborgh's Lectorium Rosicrucianum, and in the myriad Orders and Societies that jostle for attention on the internet. All of them have one feature in common: they are not, in any sense, truly Rosicrucian. There are also the many offshoots of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, created in 1888. The Inner Order of the Golden Dawn was, and is, a Rosicrucian body, the *Ordo Rosae Rubrae et Aureae Crucis*, the members of which are supposed to be professing Christians. In many instances, however, this requirement is honoured only in the breach. There are, it must be added, honourable exceptions, and some descendants of the Golden Dawn are true Rosicrucian Orders, but they are not restricted to freemasons and their membership is made up of both men and women.

Where, then, do masonic Rosicrucian bodies stand in this tally of the true and the false ? If we are true to our principles, then *all* of our members must be professing and practising Trinitarian Christians, all actively participating in prescribed areas of study and research, and all engaged in ceremonial progression as a reflection of attainment in study and not as a matter of automatic advancement. It is a sad fact that Rosicrucian bodies with a wholly or largely masonic membership are often wilfully blind to the fact that they are *not* masonic Orders *per se*; their membership should be drawn from Christian freemasons seeking an advancement in spiritual knowledge, *not* in a desire to add to their tally of masonic degrees and Orders. We ought actively to discourage potential members who seek only to add another Order and another chair to their masonic collection. Our members should be willing to bind themselves both to the doctrines of our faith and to the tenets of regular Freemasonry. The latter would prevent English masons from joining AMORC (which is prescribed by UGLE because its rituals are imitative of Freemasonry) and similar bodies, while the former should keep us away from neo-paganism, and from beliefs and practices – such as those of the O.T.O. and other derivatives of the creed of Aleister Crowley – that are inimical to Christianity.

If we keep in mind what we are supposed to be and to do, and if we act accordingly, then we can in deed describe ourselves openly and honestly as Rosicrucians. Perhaps when we are tempted to forget the aims and objects of a true Rosicrucian Order, and to drift into an easy Gnosticism, we should recall and echo the response of G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown when faced with the subtle blandishments of his adversary in the story of 'The Dagger with Wings'. The adversary, who is an occultist, argues that:

The soul goes round upon a wheel of stars and all things return ... Good and evil go round in a wheel that is one thing and not many. Do you not realise in your heart, [he asks] do you not believe behind all your beliefs, that there is but one reality and we are its shadows; and that all things are but aspects of one thing: a centre where men melt into Man and Man into God ?

No, said Father Brown.

Enough said.