

Rosicrucians and the True Spirit of Kabbalah by Peter Cardilla

I recently re-read both the *Fama* and the *Confessio*. As I did, I was taken for the first time with a different appreciation for the Rosicrucian message. I found, somewhat surprisingly, an earnest expression of what I would call the true spirit of Kabbalah. Before I explain what I mean by the “true spirit” of Kabbalah (obviously a matter of opinion), I’d like to explain why I was surprised to find it there, especially given the fact that I had already read both of these books more than once.

When the Manifestos were written and published, in the early part of the seventeenth century, Kabbalah, as a subject, had become conflated in the European mind with magic, alchemy, and zodiac astrology. Any explicit reference to Kabbalah in the Rosicrucian Manifestos, makes this association obvious.

The Rosicrucian description of Kabbalah represented a significant departure from its origins which were primarily concerned with the interpretation of holy scripture. Knowing this, I didn’t expect to be struck in the way I was. Reading, I slowly started coming around to the idea, which I now believe, that for everything about Kabbalah the Rosicrucians had wrong, the part they had right may have been the most important element.

What they had right was the idea that their symbols should be interpreted—and if need be, re-interpreted—to align with a contemporary worldview. This is what I referred to as the true spirit of Kabbalah. A system that spoke to the heart without betraying the mind. Kabbalah emerged in the middle ages as a response to rational philosophers who criticized the ritual and traditional observance of their religion. The complaint was that the old ideas were primitive, and lacked the logic and sophistication of rational thinkers. This complaint is one that is leveled again and again against specific religions and religion in general. It was the complaint of Renaissance thinkers and the natural philosophers of the Enlightenment. And it continued with Deists and remains today among scientists and secularists.

The original Kabbalists, however, rejected this criticism. Their response was an explanation of scripture and ritual that made sense in contemporary terms and made use of contemporary language. We see the Kabbalists mirroring back to the philosophers, the world as they had come to understand it—a world of four elements of earth, wind, fire, and water, a world of subtle emanations, and a hierarchical vision of reality. This was the worldview of Plato and Aristotle and rationalists after them, and it was the worldview that prevailed in Medieval Europe where Kabbalah takes form.

Five hundred years later, in the time of the Rosicrucians, the contemporary worldview still included many of the ancient Greek ideas, but it was developing toward a scientific future. The influences of Swiss physician and alchemist Paracelsus and the proto-scientific ideas of Francis Bacon were central to the Rosicrucian message and system. Their firm belief in the truth of Christianity and the earnestness with which they worked to improve their methods of

understanding nature, gave them the utmost confidence that the future would see a world improved by the union of faith and reason. This particular sentiment appeals to me because it reminds me of being a child and thinking, if we keep learning more, one day even God will be something we understand. Naive, perhaps. Lacking a certain subtlety of thought. Yes. Indeed. But honest and logical; and I'm a sucker for honesty and logic.

The Rosicrucians were explicit about the duty they adopted. One that in its essence is very similar to that of the original Kabbalists. To explain the scriptures in all times and ages. This however did not mean editing or redacting scripture, or abandoning ritual or ceremony. The preservation of tradition was a primary concern. Nothing would change about the body or the voice of the religion. The difference was entirely in the ear and spirit of the religionist.

It was assumed that not all who read the Bible, even many who experienced a benefit from reading it, actually understood it. Some amount of symbolic interpretation was thought to be required to ascertain the true meaning from the scripture. In the end, it's impossible to know whether any individual believed themselves to be decoding the miraculous message of the scripture, or to be having an inspired vision of personal revelation, or whether they were just comfortable with the idea that symbols are there to be interpreted. It may not matter. Whether their contributions were purposeful or accidental, it was the preservation of the tradition that they committed themselves to. The fact that we all still gather in their name is a testament to their success.