

Angels and Atoms: The Rosicrucian Ideal

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The historical backdrop

Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism emerged at a time where the great pillars of western civilization, science and religion, stood in an almost perfect balance, a state never seen since. This balance went unnoticed, as most things are, by most of the people of the time. Rapidly receding in the rearview mirror of history was the Renaissance which had recovered much of the ancient knowledge lost or suppressed in the Middle Ages, had invented some new things on their own, and brought about a revolution in artistic expression. Rapidly approaching was the enlightenment where a scientific worldview would challenge the enchanted worldview that had predominated human history to this point.

Now though, the masses were concerned more with the aftermath of the reformation, and its religious and political effects. If it wasn't quite so dark as the Middle Ages, it was still a time of constant war. In retrospect, the emerging scientific worldview was a far greater challenge to religious interest, but it was inconceivable to the churchmen of the time that science would profoundly affect religious thought in the coming centuries.

For many educated men of this period, there was a common language that connected the religious and the scientific, a language of symbols and allegory that spoke to educated men of the times as easily of angels, as of atoms. This language is part of the Hermetic tradition that is referred to today as the western esoteric tradition, and is largely a forgotten or rejected understanding. These men weren't Rosicrucians in name, nor would they be, but they embraced a worldview that made allowances for both man's spiritual and materialistic nature that would in succeeding times be captured under the umbrella of the Rosicrucian ideal.

Where it began

Rosicrucianism emerged in Europe, chiefly around the central region, then called the Holy Roman Empire, now occupied by modern day Germany and Austria.

How it began

Its genesis was a pamphlet called the *Fama Fraternitatis* that appeared anonymous in Germany in 1614. It spread rather quickly through the rest of Europe. It was followed by two additional documents the *Confessio Fraternitatis* (1615) and the *Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreuz* (1616). In the front piece it was described as, "Manifesto of the Most Praiseworthy Order of the Rosy Cross addressed to all the rulers, estates, and learned of Europe."

The Legend

According to the Fama, a society had been founded in the fifteenth century by a Catholic monk of noble birth, whose name is given only as C.R.C. (later identified as Christian Rosenkreuz). In his youth, C.R.C. traveled to the cities of Damear (Dah-meer) in Yemen and Fez in Morocco, and there was initiated into the magical secrets of nature. Returning to Europe, he found his learning rejected by most, but founded the Fraternity of the Rosy Cross to pass on the secrets he had learned. Under his direction a Temple, called Sanctus Spiritus, or "The House of the Holy Spirit", was built.

He died in 1484, and in 1604 members of the Fraternity rediscovered the marvelous underground seven sided vault where he had been buried, surrounded by secret books, symbols, inscriptions, and mechanical marvels. It is described that his body, as discovered by a Brother of the Order, was in a perfect state of preservation 120 years after his death...

The Fraternity therefore called on interested parties to contact them and apply for membership.

Who and Why

Like Freemasonry, the early years and a complete understanding of its genesis have been elusive to historians. Many believe that Johann Valentin Andreae, a student at the time of the publication, perhaps in conjunction with others in his circle, such as Tobias Hess and Christopher Besold (Be-solt), two noted alchemists of the time, penned the majority of these documents. In his book *The True Story of the Rosicrucians* historian Tobias Churton brought to light new documents that sought to prove the *Fama* was written by a group of Lutheran scholars at Tübingen (Too-bingen) in which Andreae took an active part (Wikipedia reference). There still remains some holes in this claim, however. For example, there are some timeline issues, in as much as *The Chemical Wedding*, the third document published, appears to be the first written.

Although historians like to know all the facts, a more interesting question is what was the intention of these documents. Andreae passed off *The Chemical Wedding*, which he did claim to have penned, as more or less of a prank, but there is some speculation that given the political and religious currents of the time, he did this to avoid persecution. This would open up

the possibility of it being anything from satire to a veiled reference to an existing organization of some kind, or to kind of utopian resolution to the religious and political troubles of the time.

Aftermath

Whatever the intentions, the publication of the initial Rosicrucian documents caused quiet a furor. It quickly spread through Europe. There were thousands of inquiries on how one might become a Rosicrucian, hundreds of self-styled Rosicrucian texts produced, and many who simply self-identified themselves as a Rosicrucian, either publicly or privately. This excitement was centuries later characterized by historian Francis Yates, the first person in academia to seriously study the effect of occult philosophy on western civilization, to refer to it as the Rosicrucian Enlightenment.

Initial commentaries

Major figures of the occult community wrote extensively on Rosicrucianism, including Michael Maier (1568-1622) and Robert Fludd (1574-1637), although both of these denied being Rosicrucians themselves, as did more mainstream folks such as Rene Descartes, perhaps noting that Adam Haselmayer, as respected doctor who was a student of the alchemist Paracelsus (Pair-rah-cell-suss) (1493-1541), was sentenced to five years as a galley slave because of remarks he made concerning the *Fama*. Dangerous times indeed! By the middle of the 17th century, the furor had largely died down, along with the last gasp of the Renaissance. The social, political, and religious issues that contributed to the creation of the initial Rosicrucian ideal went unresolved for many more years, including the period of the 30 Year War that killed 4-8 million people.

Resurrection

The events that lead to the initial Rosicrucian Enlightenment had long since passed by the middle of the 18th century, but it was not completely forgotten particularly by the Masonic establishment that had survived and even thrived after *its* 17th century beginnings. One reason for this is that Masonry had an ideal *and* an actual organization that become increasing visible over time.

There was no place for Rosicrucian symbolism in the Lodge system; for one thing, it had become non-Christian in 1723. It was a different story for additional Masonic organization that develop around the Lodge, often referred to as High Grade Masonry. Among the organizations that began including Rosicrucian elements into their ritual were: The Scottish Rite (especially the Rose Croix), The Royal Order of Scotland, and, more overtly, the Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia.

Other organizations only used the very effective ritual initiation template developed by Freemasonry to establish more overtly occult groups. Most of these had a relatively short lifespan such as the Order of the Golden and Rosy Cross, which was founded in the 1750s by the occultist

Hermann Fichtuld, and the Kabbalistic Order of the Rose+Cross, founded in Paris in 1888. Others, such as Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, founded in London in 1899, continue to this day.

America

In America, Rosicrucianism's history is far more complicated. Elements were brought there in colonial times via German pilgrims. Some were imported by European Masonic interests. Others were homegrown. One of the first the latter began with a number of groups started by Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825-1875), who appears to be in equal measures brilliant, a conman, and delusional. A more practical inheritor of the fragments he left behind was one R. Swinburne Clymer (1878-1966) who created his own organization the Fraternitas Rosae (row-say) Crucis. His primary competition came from the creation of R. Spencer Lewis (1883-1938) who founded the Ancient Mystical Order Rosae Crucis better known as AMORC. Smaller groups included the Rosicrucian Fellowship founded Max Heindel (Carl Louis Grashof), in Columbus, Ohio in 1907, and a non-Masonic version of the SRIA, the Societas Rosicruciana in America (also SRIA) all of which have active descendants today.

American Freemasonry also freely imported Rosicrucian motifs into their rituals such as the Rose Croix found in the Scottish Rite, as well as, more overtly in the Societas Rosicruciana in Civitatibus Foederatis.

Modern venues

We can see from our brief overview of the history of Rosicrucianism that it is not dissimilar to other spiritual and esoteric pursuits. It is difficult for the earnest but naïve seeker to measure whether a particular organization or activity is advancing them on their path or exposing them to a time waster – good intentioned or not.

In the time remaining, I shall attempt to give you a modern perspective on the Rosicrucian Ideal, admittedly from my own perspective. I will also provide a reading list should you wish to go deeper on your own.

There are at least four Rosicrucian venues today, although they may be mixed and matched in various ways. The first are those that are public in nature and often run correspondence school type curriculums, although they may also have local organizational units. Of those we discussed, AMORC and the Societas Rosicruciana in America are two examples.

The second is a study group format of which the Societas Rosicruciana in Civitatibus Foederatis is an excellent example from Freemasonry.

The third is a group that practices one or more esoteric disciplines such as alchemy or ritual magic. The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn is an excellent example.

Finally, there is a strictly academic approach, which may be considered a more formal and professional version of the study group.

The original intention

The *Fama* listed six characteristics of the allegorical Order (1) *That none should profess any other thing, than but to cure the sick, and that Freely* (2) *That they should not be constrained to wear any distinctive dress, but therein follow the custom of the country* (3) *That every year on the day of Corpus Christi, they should meet at the Collegium ad Spiritum Sanctum or write the cause of absence* (4) *Every one should look for some worthy person of either sex, who after his decease might succeed him* (5) *The R.C. be their mark, seal, and character* (6) *The fraternity to remain secret for one hundred years.*

It is worthwhile noting that this appears more of a prescription for a religious or mystical order. It makes no reference to more mysterious subjects such as alchemy and the Qabala, and it may have been meant to poke fun at the religious orders of the day that professed piety, but were very much into power politics.

Christian

Modern Rosicrucian groups have certain characteristics that one can use to validate their claim to the tradition. It should first be noted that Rosicrucianism is a strictly Christian tradition that arose in Christian Europe. Therefore, all true Rosicrucians groups require adherence to the Christian faith.

Scholarship

Although these groups have an overarching Christian motif, they do encourage scholarship into both scientific and spiritual subjects and often work to reconcile the two. They are open to learning about other religions and philosophies and see certain perennial themes in all true religions. Often their Christianity is highly personal, allowing for a less dogmatic approach than favored by mainstream religion.

Qabalah

Rosicrucianism has over the centuries become an umbrella for various esoteric traditions. Two, however, are of primary importance. The first is the Qabala, here spelt with a "Q" to differentiate it from the Kabbalah (spelt with a "K") found in Jewish theology where it originated. The Tree of Life diagram is central to this tradition, but by no means the whole story. In broad terms, it is a map from our World of Action in Malkuth (at the bottom of the Tree) to the Divine, in Kether (the top of the Tree).

Those Rosicrucian groups that practice ritual initiation often have a Grade structure symbolized by advancement up the Tree to more sublime knowledge.

Alchemy

The second tradition found in most Rosicrucian groups is alchemy, and specifically spiritual alchemy. The *exoteric* form of alchemy concerned with transmuting metals and the elixir of life is well known, and generally dismissed (although it shouldn't be), but *esoteric* alchemy is concerned with the transmuting a person's persona to better enable them to follow a spiritual path. As a person progresses in the group, they often symbolically go through this process, and may do practical work to foster it as well.

Freemasonry

Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism emerged at about the same time, although in different places. Once they appear on the public's radar, they were bound together in the collective imagination. However, other than a few professed Rosicrucians that have been identified as Freemasons, there was little similarity between the two.

From what we know of early Masonic history, it developed first as a social group, to which charitable endeavors were added, and finally a deeper philosophical framework. These are referred to in modern ritual as brotherly love, relief, and truth. Its philosophical message, articulated through a succession of ritualistic evolutionary steps, was in part symbolically mystical (a rebirth as a better man) and moralistic (emphasizing good character built around a Judeo-Christian framework with more than a dash of the Stoics). Although much is made of its esoteric intention, there is little evidence of in the lodge system, but it should be noted that many brothers inclined toward the esoteric, visualize it that way, which is, at least in my mind, perfectly fine. One must admit that much of the symbolism lends itself to esoteric interpretation – geometry leads to sacred geometry, the two pillars to the Qabalistic Middle Pillar, and the four Royal Arch banners to the Ancient Elements without too much effort. For the average Mason, however, Freemasonry was ultimately about being a better man in the here and now, or in Qabalistic terms, in Malkuth, the World of Action.

Tree

Despite its underlying sense of organization and charitable pursuits (healing the sick) there appears to be no intention of the author or authors of the original manifestos in starting an real organization, and it took many decades before it occurred to esotericists that, "If not them, why not us." When Rosicrucian organizations did emerge they used the Masonic method of ritualistic initiation, but little else, except in expressly Masonic groups i.e. Masonic first, Rosicrucian second, which came to be known as High Grade Masonry. It should be noted as an aside, that the Masonic tradition of ritual initiation has been used beyond organization that could be term Rosicrucian - as diverse as pagan Wiccan and Druid groups, for example.

Where Freemasons were concerned with the here and now and effecting a moralistic change in its members, Rosicrucians endeavor to lead men further - toward their divine spark, as articulated in Gnostic Christianity. In this sense Freemasonry served as an outer order to the Rosicrucian's inner order. In Qabalistic terms Masonry stood at the foot of the Tree in Malkuth, whereas Rosicrucianism endeavored to move up the Tree, its spiritual alchemy component further refining the Masonic goal of making good men better.

Summary and Comparison

For a summary of the attributes of Freemasonry compared to Rosicrucianism this table may be a helpful memory aid.

Let me call to your some specifics of these general attributes. In terms of organizational development, our best historical research into Freemasonry suggests it was first a social platform, and only later added the various trappings we associate with it today. The Rosicrucians had a great deal of content available to them, and developed around a concept that only later became organized.

The fundamental lodge organization of Freemasonry has always encouraged scholarship, but its only official and consistent way of teaching is through the ritual. Even the education programs established by modern Grand Lodges mainly focus on the organizational, not the philosophical. Rosicrucian organizations by contrast tend to use ritual only for initiation which they view as important, but their day to day focus is on study, research and practice.

Although the Fama suggested that Rosicrucians heal the sick gratis, Rosicrucian organizations throughout its history have not typically focused on charitable work beyond recognizing charity as a Christian virtue that its Fratres should practice in their daily lives, and certainly don't have the highly centralized charities supported by modern Freemasonry.

As with any group of like mind individuals they are social and enjoy each other's company, but again don't give it the central focus found in Freemasonry.

SRICF

The Societas Rosicruciana in Civitatibus Foederatis is the most overtly Rosicrucian Masonic organization in the United States. It has counterparts today in England, Scotland, Portugal, and Canada. Its primary focus is research, although it has a ritual covering 9 Grades – 7 open to all members, and 2 honorary. The first four are based on Alchemical symbolism. Its organizational units are termed Colleges and membership is open to Christian Master Masons. It is, however, selective and membership in each College is limited to 72. Colleges exist in most states and a few countries outside the US governed by the SRICF High council.

Trilogy

In closing, I'd like to give you a few ideas for further exploration beginning with a source for the three Rosicrucian manifesto themselves. There have been many, many publications of these documents translated into English. While you can find free sources, I recommend this recent volume compiled by some folks who have spend a lifetime in esoteric and Rosicrucian research. You may want to explore some of their other writings on the subject of Rosicrucianism.

Zanoni

Edward Bulwer Lytton was among the first popular novelists – think Charles Dickson with whom he was friends – and although very popular and as a result very wealthy in his time, his novels are largely unknown today. He was also criticized in his time for writing too much about occult subjects. There is evidence that he practiced a variety of esoteric traditions, but there is no evidence that he did so as part of any organization include Freemasonry. This book is a pleasant read even now, and it gives the reader a feeling of attitudes toward Rosicrucianism in the mid 19th century.

Yates

Francis Yates produced the first serious academic historical research into western occult tradition, today known as the Western Esoteric Tradition. Her books reads like a college textbook, thorough and fascinating, but a difficult read nonetheless.

Waite

Before Yates opened up academia to the idea that the occult played an important role in world history and traditions, A. E. Waite's *Brotherhood of the Cross* was the definitive source for those interested in Rosicrucianism. Despite a verbose writing style and given to unprofessional scholarship at time, this book remains in the bibliographies of many current treatments of the subject. This is one of the few books that goes in to some detail on Masonic connections to Rosicrucianism, particularly relative to modern Masonic organizations that embrace it.

Churton

Although Churton claims new evidence to support the claim that Andreae and his circle created the three original manifestos, this book isn't an academic text and lacks the footnoting required to easily check his claims. Nonetheless, this book covers the known material accurately and is easy to read to boot. Note that a later version titled the *Invisibles* was also published, but is out of print and difficult to purchase.

Ciceros

The five books I have just recommended are largely about the history of Rosicrucianism. What could you expect to find in a practicing Rosicrucian group? The Golden Dawn is referenced a great deal in this context because of its comprehensive integration of the most widely practiced

western esoteric methods. The Ciceros are two of the Greatly Honored Chiefs of one of the present Golden Dawn orders, and have published many books on the subject. A good overview of what one finds in a practicing Rosicrucian group. It has an excellent section on the aspects of character required for esoteric studies.

Presentation on Rosicrucianism to a Lodge Group

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