

Rosicrucianism

Definition and Origins

Rosicrucianism is a major esoteric current that comprises a textual and symbolic tradition as well as a large number of social organizations, most of them initiatory. It originated with three controversial volumes published in Germany between 1614 and 1620, amidst deep political and religious anxieties in Europe that would soon erupt in the Thirty Years' War. The two most important texts, the *Fama Fraternitatis* (1614) and the *Confessio Fraternitatis* (1615), are known as the Rosicrucian “manifestos,” and were most likely written by a small group of scholars in Tübingen, including Johann Valentin Andreae (1586–1654), Christoph Besold (1577–1648), and Tobias Hess (1586–1614). On the one hand, the manifestos advanced a vision of Christian piety harmonized with the emerging sciences, drawing on a range of esoteric influences from alchemy and Paracelsianism to Christian kabbalah and Hermeticism; on the other, they announced the existence of a secret society founded by a medieval initiate into Oriental mysteries named Christian Rosenkreuz, which keeps powerful esoteric secrets and works towards a millennialist goal: the “general reformation of the whole world.” The publications sparked wide interest and a major furor over the existence of these Rosicrucian brothers, inspiring a series of pro-Rosicrucian books written in the spirit of the manifestos, including the writings of Robert Fludd (1674–1637), Michael Maier (1568–1622), Jan Amos Comenius (1592–1670) and others.

From Fiction to Fact

While historians agree that no Rosicrucian brotherhood really existed at the time of the manifestos' publication (Andreae famously referred to the texts as a *ludibrium*), several such societies were later invented. The first influential order of this type was the German Orden des Gold- und Rosenkreutz, founded in the 1750s in Germany and emphasizing the alchemical aspects of the earlier texts. Generally, Rosicrucianism was popular in Pietist circles, and among protestant literati with an interest in aspects of seventeenth- and early-eighteenth century natural philosophy, especially alchemy, astrology, and Paracelsian medicine. During the seventeenth century, Rosicrucianism came to be pitted against the perceived rationalism, scientific materialism, and atheism of the nascent Enlightenment movement and the mechanical philosophy of nature. It would also influence the development of Freemasonry (which was generally perceived as aligned with Enlightenment values), with the introduction of Rosicrucian-themed degrees and symbolism. As such, by the late-

eighteenth century there was an open tension between Rosicrucianism and those Masons who aligned with the staunchly pro-Enlightenment Illuminaten of Bavaria. The Rosicrucian current thus came to occupy an ambivalent position in the epistemic struggles of early-modern Europe: at first enthusiastic of the sciences of the seventeenth-century, which it sought to reconcile with Christianity; then hostile to the sciences of the eighteenth-century, becoming a protective vehicle for what was now considered “occult science.”

Rosicrucianism and Occultism

Rosicrucianism would play a significant role in the development of modern occultism in the nineteenth century. What became the Theosophical Society (in 1875) first considered calling itself Rosicrucian, and the most influential magical orders of the late-nineteenth century, namely the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor (likely established in the 1870s) and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (est. 1887), were explicitly Rosicrucian, with the latter adopting its grade structure from the German Gold- und Rosenkreutz by way of the high-degree masonic order Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia (SRIA). In France, seminal occultists Stanislas de Guaita (1861–1897), Papus (Gérard Encausse; 1865–1916), and Joséphin Péladan (1858–1918) founded the Kabbalistic Order of the Rose Cross (1887), with Péladan splitting in 1890 to form his rivalling Catholic Order of the Rose Cross and hosting his famous “Rosicrucian Salons” with the Paris avantgarde. Key occultist authors of the early twentieth century, from Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) to Arthur Edward Waite (1857–1942), wrote substantially on Rosicrucianism and the Rosicrucians.

The twentieth century would see the establishment of a range of new Rosicrucian orders, often drawing on various strands of nineteenth-century occultism. The Rosicrucian Fellowship (est. 1909 by Carl Lois von Grasshoff) emerged from a theosophical milieu, and later gave rise to the Dutch Lectorium Rosicrucianum (est. 1935), which focuses on Christian mysticism and currently has about 15,000 students around the world. The Golden Dawn’s Rosicrucian elements have been perpetuated in a number of new magical and initiatory orders, such as Aleister Crowley’s (1875–1947) Ordo Templi Orientis (with about 4,000 members worldwide), and new/offshoot Golden Dawn groups, such as the Rosicrucian Order of Alpha et Omega® run by David Griffin from his base in Nevada since the 1990s, or the Sodalitas Rosae Crucis & Solis Alati, operating primarily in the Scandinavian countries since 2003.

The by far largest contemporary Rosicrucian organization is, however, the Ancient and Mystical Order Rosæ Crucis (AMORC), founded by the advertisement illustrator and amateur psychical researcher Harvey Spencer Lewis (1883–1939) in 1915. Its headquarters, the Rosicrucian Park in San Diego (established 1927), with its remarkable Egyptian themed temple, museums, and planetarium, has become a notable tourist attraction. The key to AMORC's success, however, was the adoption of a correspondence course model by which distant members could receive course material through the mail. Thus, the vast majority of AMORC's estimated 120,000 members worldwide today never attend any meetings or engage in other Rosicrucian social activities.

Rosicrucianism Today: A Brief Summary

Today, Rosicrucianism does not exist as a single, identifiable current or family of organizations, but rather as a mythical and symbolic theme that can be found in a large array of different organizations, from the Masonic to the magical to the Theosophical to various new religious movements. While a few organizations, such as the Lectorium Rosicrucianum and the national bodies of the Societas Rosicruciana (e.g. the Societas Rosicruciana in America) proclaim themselves to be working strictly in a tradition going back to the Rosicrucian manifestos and the largely Christian millenarian ideas found therein, the majority of groups mix Rosicrucian symbolism with other elements.

Cross-references: Esotericism, Illuminati, Kabbalah, Magic, Millennialism, New Religious Movements

Further readings:

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