

**THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF CHRISTIAN ROSENCREUTZ:  
ROSICRUCIANISM FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

**By**

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But who and what was Christian Rosencreutz ? Was he a historical reality or a mythical figure ? When and where did he live and die – if he lived at all – and why should we be concerned with his resurrection ?

All that we know of him is found in an anonymous pamphlet published in Germany in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. This pamphlet was small in size but great in influence, both then and now, for the clamour stirred up by its impact has resonated down the centuries. It was first printed at Cassel in 1614, and its title (in English translation) is *Universal and General Reformation of the Whole Wide World; together with the Fama Fraternitatis of the Laudable Order of the Rosy Cross, written to all the Learned and Rulers of Europe* and so on.

The core of the text concerns the travels and work of ‘Brother C.R.C.’ [C.R. in the English version of Thomas Vaughan], ‘a German, the chief and original of our Fraternity’ who laboured long and hard to ‘attain more and more to the perfect knowledge of ... Jesus Christ and of Nature’. He was born in 1378 and as a youth he travelled to the Holy Land, then proceeded into Arabia where he spent three years learning from the wise men, amongst whom he had been welcomed. Subsequently he went to Egypt and next sailed to Fez in Morocco – then a great centre of learning – to complete his education. After two years he returned to Europe, offering his newly acquired knowledge to the learned of Spain, who rejected it, and finally arrived back in Germany. Five years after his return he took three disciples and established the ‘Fraternity of the Rosy Cross’, dedicated to the general Reformation of spiritual and material knowledge.

The Fraternity took in four other brethren, ‘all batchelors and of vowed virginity’, and the six articles of the Rule of the Fraternity were laid down. These set out that their aim was ‘to cure the sick and that gratis’; to wear no special habit, but to ‘follow the custom of the country’; to meet once a year, on the day C [perhaps Corpus Christi], at the House of the Holy Spirit; to ensure that each Brother should find a worthy successor; to use the word R.C. [Rosy Cross] as their ‘seal, mark and character’; and to keep the existence of the Fraternity secret for one hundred years.

Eventually, in 1484, Father C.R.C., as he now was, died, but his grave was unknown to subsequent generations of the brethren – until, as in all the best stories, it was fortuitously discovered, complete with an inscription on the door reading [in Latin] ‘After 120 years I shall open’: which it did, for this was the year 1604. Inside the wondrously decorated vault, lit by an ever-burning lamp, was a marvellous tomb, covered, like the vault with symbolic inscriptions and diagrams. Within the tomb was the miraculously preserved body of Father C.R.C., and the remainder of the text

recounts the symbolism, and its meaning and implications for future generations. But there is no resurrection: C.R.C. does not wake and remains in the tomb.

Thus far the story of C.R.C. – who doesn't become fully Christian Rosenkreuz until his appearance in another and more substantial text of 1616, the *Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*, an alchemical allegory allegedly written by Christian Rosenkreutz (it was not about *his* wedding), but really the work of a young Lutheran theologian, Johann Valentin Andreae (1586-1654). We know that the *Fama*, and the subsequent *Confessio Fraternitatis* (1615) were produced within a scholarly circle that included Andreae, so it is virtually certain that C.R.C. really *is* Christian Rosenkreutz. At any rate, it is good enough for me, so the hero of the *Fama* shall be the hero of this paper also.

But was Christian Rosenkreutz a real, historical individual? I have not the slightest doubt that he was not. The story of his travels is a vehicle for propagating a particular form of spiritual philosophy, and in many respects the story of his life is an allegory of the life of Christ: there are clear parallels, for example, his youthful discussions with the doctors in the Temple; the journey into Egypt; the gathering of disciples; the implicit second coming. However, Christ-like or not, Rosicrucianism, as that form of spiritual philosophy became known, has had a chequered history ever since the time that these manifestos of the Fraternity first appeared, but I do not intend to give you even a brief history of the movement (if such it was) for you can easily find it for yourselves. What I shall do is consider the implications of the myth for this new century.

The influence of Rosicrucianism has probably been greater in literary circles than in philosophical ones; certainly it is through literature that the ideas and ideals of the Fraternity have entered the public mind. Let us consider two examples, both from the work of W.B. Yeats, which give us sound reasons for concerning ourselves with Christian Rosenkreuz and with working for his symbolic resurrection. First, Yeats's poem of 1914, 'The Mountain Tomb':

Pour wine and dance if manhood still have pride,  
Bring roses if the rose be yet in bloom;  
The cataract smokes upon the mountain side,  
Our Father Rosicross is in his tomb.

Pull down the blinds, bring fiddle and clarionet  
That there be no foot silent in the room  
Nor mouth from kissing, nor from wine unwet;  
Our Father Rosicross is in his tomb.

In vain, in vain; the cataract still cries;  
The everlasting taper lights the gloom  
All wisdom shut into his onyx eyes  
Our Father Rosicross sleeps in his tomb.

For Yeats, the sleeping Rosenkreuz is emblematic of a world dead to spiritual reality, concerned only with the material world, with bodily pleasure; all very well but ultimately aimless vanity. And yet Yeats also firmly believed that the world was

changing, that Christian Rosenkreuz was set to be woken. In an essay of 1895, 'The Body of the Father Christian Rosencrux', Yeats wrote this:

The followers of the Father Christian Rosencrux, says the old tradition, wrapped his imperishable body in noble raiment and laid it under the house of their Order, in a tomb containing the symbols of all things in heaven and earth, and in the waters under the earth, and set about him inextinguishable magical lamps, which burnt on generation after generation, until other students of the Order came upon the tomb by chance. It seems to me that the imagination has had no very different history during the last two hundred years, but has been laid in a great tomb of criticism, and had set over it inextinguishable magical lamps of wisdom and romance, and has been altogether so nobly housed and apparelled that we have forgotten that its wizard lips are closed, or but opened for the complaining of some melancholy and ghostly voice.

But he added this conviction: 'I cannot get it out of my mind that this age of criticism is about to pass, and an age of imagination, of emotion, of moods, of revelation, about to come in its place; for certainly belief in a supersensual world is at hand again'. As it was for Yeats, so it is for us, but our age is one of much greater uncertainty and fear, of more deeply ingrained secularism, of more widespread materialism and the material indulgence that it brings, and perhaps worst of all, an almost omnipresent selfish Individualism. The last century has also brought the virtual collapse of institutional, orthodox religion: drowned on the one hand in the swamp of mindless fundamentalism, and buried on the other beneath the dunghill of aggressive, arrogant secularism. Christian Rosenkreutz has yet to be truly awoken, but wake him we must – not only to combat the enemies of spirituality, but also to rescue from the disordered chaos of freeform spirituality the whole ignorant, credulous mass of bewildered humanity, who, denied a God in whom to believe, now believe as G.K. Chesterton foretold, not in nothing but in anything.

So there you have good reasons for concerning ourselves with the resurrection of Christian Rosenkreuz, But how do we put this good intent into practice ? First we must know just what it that we are trying to do; we must be clear as to what Rosicrucianism really is. At the time of the manifestos it represented a programme for bringing about a universal acceptance of an enlightened and tolerant form of the Reformed Christian Church, and of the somewhat other-worldly spirituality – effectively Lutheran Pietism – that would follow in its wake. Today we may see it in a rather different light, but before attempting to see that light, let us look at what Rosicrucianism is not; the kaleidoscope of bizarre interpretations and accretions that have grown up around the name.

It is difficult to determine whether Rosicrucianism has suffered more from its friends or from its enemies. The latter have seen it variously as a body of 'fanatics' holding 'the most crude and incomprehensible notions' (The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century); as 'Lutheran disciples of Paracelsus ... intemperate in their language (and) rabid in their religious prejudices (a youthful A.E. Waite, before he learned better and became a Rosicrucian himself); and in the mind of latter-day evangelicals as a false religion drawn from a variety of traditions, and seeking to 'blend all other existing religions into itself'<sup>1</sup>.

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

Currently, and more imprecisely, the online Wikipedia describes it as, ‘a legendary and secretive Order dating from the 15<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century’, the consciousness of whose Adepts is ‘said to be like that of demi-gods’. This runs counter to Waite’s views, for while he was right, on the basis of the manifestos, about the alchemical and Paracelsian enthusiasm of the Rosicrucians, they were for him very human in their failings. Would-be Rosicrucians of his own day would have preferred the Wikipedia line. Both Hargrave Jennings and Franz Hartmann subscribed to this view of Rosicrucian adepts as superhuman; both reported marvellous, extravagant and patently untrue stories of their own and others’ experience of the Rosicrucians; and Jennings saw them as the remnants of primitive phallic worship. Unquestionably a phallic view.

Self-styled Rosicrucians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have offered different, but equally wild accounts of the roots of the Rosicrucian movement. William Wynn Westcott, the most prominent masonic Rosicrucian of his day, believed that the ‘Rosicrucians were [themselves] descended from the Egyptian Mysteries’ – a view shared by past and present leaders of AMORC. George Plummer, the first head of the non-masonic *Societas Rosicruciana in America*, thought that Rosicrucianism was even older, being ‘the Renaissance of an ancient world-religion far antedating even that of the Egyptians’. These views concern the history of Rosicrucianism and you may feel that they have little relevance to its principles or philosophy. Should you feel this, then I fear that you are wrong.

Consider for a moment some other historical perspectives. Christopher McIntosh, in his book *The Rosy Cross Unveiled* (1980), sees them as spiritual and possibly institutional descendants of the Gnostics of the early Christian centuries: a view shared by Colin Wilson, and by the founders and current leaders of the largest European Rosicrucian body of the present day, the *Lectorium Rosicrucianum*. This ‘gnostic Spiritual School’, which grew out of the Dutch branch of the Californian ‘Rosicrucian Fellowship’ of Max Heindel, looks upon the 17<sup>th</sup> century Rosicrucians as spiritual heirs of the medieval Cathars. But the Cathars, like the Gnostics before them, were dualists, believing – very roughly – in a wicked creator of the material universe and a good creator of the spiritual world. Can this belief, or anything remotely resembling it, be found in the Rosicrucian manifestos or in any of the various texts and institutions that sprang out of the ferment created by the manifestos? No it can not.

The Rosicrucianism of the manifestos was a child of its time, reflecting the fears and hostilities of the wars of religion that had followed the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. For this reason it shows a violent and unreasoning hatred of the Papacy. But the same period saw the birth of spiritual alchemy – the interpretation of the alchemical process in terms of the regeneration of the human soul – and the manifestos are rich in alchemical and Paracelsian symbolism. Such symbolism, however, is neutral in respect of Christian doctrine, and the fact that the Rosicrucians were spiritual alchemists does not dilute their Christian faith and commitment.

The original Rosicrucians, whether they were purely literary or really did found a community, were devout Christians dedicated to a life of practical piety. Indeed, nowhere in the manifestos will you find religious dualism, or any rejection of either traditional Christian orthodoxy or traditional religious forms. Nor will you find any added doctrines or dogmas in the manifestos, and there is no hint that salvation might be

attained by knowledge alone, as the Gnostics believed. They were, it must be emphasised, neither the heirs of a secret, pre-Christian wisdom religion, nor the superhuman progenitors of a new Gnosticism. How, then, should we look at Rosicrucianism today ?

We should begin by recognising 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, which summary, I am well aware, is a very simple and unsophisticated outline. 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, nor should it be an eclectic New Age syncretism that absorbs incompatible and contradictory doctrines and happily believes far more than six impossible things before breakfast. At this point, on the assumption that you are becoming restless at the prospect of an evangelical sermon, I must ask you to be patient: there are surprises to come.

The founding Rosicrucians were fully grounded in Christian spirituality, but they 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. Here I should digress briefly to emphasise that what is described as ‘Esoteric Christianity’ is a very different thing: it is not a phrase applied to a deeper understanding of the spiritual or angelic worlds and their significance for us, or to the quest for the means by which we enter into the mysteries of God. These are the province of Christian esotericism; ‘Esoteric Christianity’, so called, is the name given to an amalgam of suitably bland Christian, Buddhist and Hindu doctrines that seemed to create an appropriate ersatz Christianity, the ‘lesser Mysteries’ be it noted, which would be palatable within the confines of Annie Besant’s Theosophical Society. It may be left to those who enjoy its taste: it gives no sustenance to the Rosicrucian.

The Rosicrucians’ spiritual practices were also dedicated to the service of God and Man; they did not seek to exercise their wills to obtain personal spiritual power: they were not, in any sense, magicians. To make this clear, I should perhaps set out the distinction between esotericists and magicians, using Gerald Yorke’s description of the respective approaches of the Hermetist and the Rosicrucian. His context was the work of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, but his argument holds equally well in other settings:

Now Hermetic Orders as such are only Christian in that they include some Christianity but do not stress it. Rosicrucian Orders on the other hand are primarily Christian but draw on other pre-Christian sources. In other words the Hermetists always try to become God in his anthropomorphic or in some cases theriomorphic form. They inflame themselves with prayer until they become Adonai the Lord ... whereas the Christian approached God the Father through Christ (Adonai) but never tried to become Christ, only to become as Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Evelyn Underhill put it more simply. ‘The Magician gets’, she wrote, ‘The Mystic gives.’

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Kathleen Raine, *Yeats, The Tarot and The Golden Dawn*. Dublin, Dolmen Press, 1972, p13

So it is clear, I trust, that the true Rosicrucian should be a professing and practising Trinitarian Christian, but willing to enrich the store of Christian esotericism from the spiritual insights of other religious traditions – without, however, compromising his or her own faith, for syncretism is no part of the Rosicrucian way. And before we proceed on our way I would draw your attention to one word in the last sentence: ‘her’

Rosicrucians of today, most of them at least, differ fundamentally from the community of Christian Rosenkreuz. His Fraternity consisted solely of men and of 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, although Rosicrucian bodies predicated solely on regular masonic membership cannot, of necessity, admit women. But their fitness to be Rosicrucians was recognised in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the Comte de Chazal pointed out to Sigmund Bacstrom that worthy women could be included in their number. 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.

In addition to being committed to the Christian faith, he or she must be a student of Christian esotericism, and active in applying the fruits of such study in teaching or in healing (in its broadest sense). The true Rosicrucian also confines his or her spiritual activities to those which are compatible with Christian doctrine and morality. This does not, of course, preclude the study of other faiths, or of esoteric beliefs and practices, all of which studies should be encouraged. Nor does engaging in individual or corporate Rosicrucian spiritual or ceremonial activities – in other words, putting Christian esotericism into practice – imply any form of personal spiritual superiority. But what is the end of all this ? It is twofold.

First, there is the spiritual goal of the individual Rosicrucian: to work towards his or her spiritual regeneration, or, to paraphrase A.E. Waite, ‘to attain the immemorial knowledge concerning our way of return whence we came by a method of the inward life’. And secondly, recognising, without attempting to bind the idea in theological chains, that as all of humanity has fallen from its original high estate in the spiritual world, every Rosicrucian is duty bound to guide others on the way of return as part of the total restitution of mankind; to act, as it were, as a Christian analogue of a Bodhisattva.

But to accomplish this, even to a very small degree requires a programme of work, appropriate tools to carry out such work, and an organised body to provide the framework within which this can be done. Without these the individual Rosicrucian is powerless to waken Christian Rosenkreuz, and might well be likened to the dead atheist, on whose tombstone the epitaph read: ‘Here lies an atheist – all dressed up and no place to go’.

So what is to be done ? First we must recognise how we go about such work. A community, fraternity, Order or whatever we name our corporate structure is our first and essential requirement, for it is only within a close community of like-minded souls that the experiences of our interior, spiritual work can be shared. Such experiences are intensely personal and there is no publicly accessible language by which they can be

communicated – only the language of symbolism, of verbal and visual imagery that are the common currency of esoteric Orders, whether Christian or otherwise. This is the reason for Christ's injunction not to cast pearls before swine: it both distresses us and embarrasses those in the secular world who cannot understand us and do not thank us for intruding our spiritual reflections upon their beer and football. At the same time it is important that any Rosicrucian fraternity does not become or remain a self-satisfied, private coterie, turning its very superior back upon the unworthy world. It is, after all, our world also.

The material aspects of the mechanics of establishing an Order or Fraternity need not concern us here, they are little different from what is involved in organising any communal activity. The interior aspects are another matter, for the practical work of a Rosicrucian Order involves interaction with spiritual realms and all that exists in those realms. Whether these realms are subjective, elements of our complex psycho-spiritual nature, or, as I believe, an objective reality in the non-empirical, spiritual universe, they can be entered along safe paths, by the tried and tested methods of traditional spiritual practice, or by decidedly dangerous paths, on to which the novice is all too easily enticed by false guides and spiritual pride.

Not all who live in the spiritual worlds are well-disposed towards humanity: the fall of man was accompanied by the fall of angels. Whether or not their redemption is possible we do not know, but the inhabitants of other realms are best approached with caution. Which leads me to the qualities, in addition to those already considered, that should be sought and found in appropriate candidates for admission to a Rosicrucian Order. Every suitable candidate must be tolerant, with a loving attitude to fellow members; discreet, able to keep silence in the secular world as well as within the Order; possessed of true spiritual humility, thus free of spiritual pride; disciplined, able to follow a given spiritual path despite its hardships, and willing to submit to authority within a hierarchical institution (for such is the nature of esoteric Orders); and possessed of patience and forbearance, so that the practices of prayer and meditation are not burdens, and the personal shortcomings of oneself and others do not become distractions.

The question remains of how such a paragon of virtue may be found. Of course, the very quest presupposes an existing and viable Rosicrucian Order, the members of which will presumably possess the needed qualities and will be able to recognise them in others. What concerns us is how such an Order may be identified, given that it is private not public and is unlikely to engage in commercial proselytising. The obvious route is to seek it through venues such as this, through institutions with similar or analogous aims, and through enquiry at specialist bookshops or via appropriate internet websites. Each of these avenues of approach requires caution, discretion and common sense – just remember that the qualities sought by an Order in a candidate are the same as those expected by that candidate within the Order in question.

Let us suppose that Order and candidate have finally and successfully come together. What activities will the Order pursue, how will it teach the members – the Rosicrucian Fratres and Sorores – and what will be their duties in the individual and corporate quest to waken Christian Rosenkreutz and to play a small but necessary part in the slow process of regenerating humanity?

The Rosicrucian path involves instruction, study, and spiritual practices, which include healing of body, mind and spirit, as appropriate and insofar as the individual Rosicrucian possesses the relevant healing ability. The tools for this work also involve body, mind and spirit. Thus traditional processes of prayer, meditation and contemplation will be employed, all of which involve both training and dedicated effort, for they are directed towards the ultimate goals of experiencing the Divine Vision and of attaining Divine Union, the direct experience of God. This, it must be stressed, is a final goal for the individual and is rarely achieved during our mortal lifetimes. True mystics are rare indeed. The intellectual mind is involved in study and in structured debate that takes place within a consecrated space – the Temple of the Order.

That Temple has to be constructed by physical effort, whether it be permanent or a temporary arrangement of furnishings within an appropriate space. The form and furnishing of the Temple are designed to present visual symbols that will provide one of the keys necessary to unlock the doors that open upon a true understanding of spiritual experience. The language of such experience is symbolic, expressed in visual and verbal imagery, drawn from the symbols of alchemical transmutation, from biblical and visionary texts, from hermetic symbolism – all of which symbolic forms are seen to perfection in the *Secret Symbols of the Rosicrucians*, the marvellous collection of engraved images and texts that encapsulated the work of the Golden and Rosy Cross, an 18<sup>th</sup> century society that fused the language, imagery and practices of Alchemy, Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry.

The remaining element of the Rosicrucian way is that of symbolic action: the ritual and ceremonial by which the Fraternity is united in spiritual purpose, and through which the individual, working in harmony with the other members, advances on the path of inner progression through the spiritual worlds. In short, the Rosicrucian follows the paths of study, devotion and ceremonial, always with the goal of personal and corporate spiritual regeneration: the original goal of the *Fama*, a General and Universal Reformation. And as increasing numbers of dedicated Rosicrucians follow this communal path, so Christian Rosenkreutz wakes from the sleep of death and his spirit is reborn in the world.

That is the vision of Rosicrucianism in and for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. All that remains is to put it into practice, and here we discover the pitfalls. These are both material and psycho-spiritual. Let us follow the hypothetical progress of our would-be Rosicrucian. First, he or she must find an Order, if the Order hasn't actively sought for them. Some do, notably the commercial Rosicrucian bodies that seek to bring a realisation of the value of spiritual poverty to their members by first ensuring their material poverty: this by way of exorbitant fees, subscriptions and other contributions. And all against the first precept of the *Fama*, 'to cure the sick – which includes healing the spirit by teaching – and that gratis'. Simony, the taking of money in exchange for putative spiritual gifts or powers, is a sin, but that doesn't stop the peddlers of fool's gold and pseudo-Rosicrucian verbal rubbish. [Don't ask me to name them in public; they are too litigious for my liking, but I will gladly make my opinions known in private !]

Our astute Rosicrucian has avoided the first pitfall, but then comes upon the twin problems of discrimination and its lack. There are Rosicrucian Orders restricted to freemasons, largely for historical reasons but the ban on women and non-masons remains. It is also doubtful in the extreme whether such Orders can any longer claim to

be truly Rosicrucian; to separate the sheep from the goats among the restrictive bodies would, however, be invidious, so yet again you must ask for a private audience. Then there are those with no concept of the Christian nature of Rosicrucianism; syncretistic to the core they will offer ancient and modern paganism, a chaos of contradictory doctrines and a universal wooliness that is perhaps more appropriate in the sheep they mislead than in themselves as the would-be shepherds of a Rosicrucian flock. The commercial bodies will, of course not only mislead their flocks, they will shear them also.

Is there, then, any Rosicrucian body that can claim to be honest, honourable and truly dedicated to the work of spiritual regeneration ? There is; indeed, I can say more correctly that there are. And will I tell you what and where they are, and how you may approach them ? To this I must answer, perhaps, but if you ask I will make sure that you are pointed on the Way, for there are some among you who are far more qualified than I am to give you directions. With which gnomic comment I draw to a close.

And, if you have been, thank you for listening.