

The Worm in the Bud: Esotericism, Secrecy, and the Rosicrucians

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‘It doesn’t matter if the things are true. What counts, remember, is to possess a secret.’

Umberto Eco, *Foucault’s Pendulum*

Esotericism is a complex phenomenon, and the intention here is to examine one of its more typical elements: secrecy. What the believer believes, and the manner in which those beliefs are expressed, are the principal sight-lines through which the scholar has critical access to a religion; even one in which he or she does not actually participate. The question of participation, and whether or not it is possible to do justice to religious views one does not share, is a vexed one; and never more so than when the religion in question takes it as a duty to restrict access to its most important ideas. Such is the case here, and the situation with esotericism is ironic, for those concomitant traits – the possession of powerful, transformative knowledge (*gnosis*), and the jealous keeping of it – simultaneously invite the scholar along the way to understand the topic yet, at the crucial moment, bar the way. Of belief, then, it would appear we can say comparatively little. Of practice, on the other hand we may observe a great deal. We may not know the secret, but we can observe the practice of its keeping.

This paper addresses firstly the relative importance of secrecy in any definition of esotericism, and touches on the necessary limits imposed on those who wish to study it, as well as citing a practical solution to this dilemma. The case study here is a comparison between the earliest known appearance of the Rosicrucian Order and one of its largest contemporary manifestations. Without access to the wisdom of the Rosicrucians, the most obvious uniformity between the earlier and later versions of this religion is a tendency to attract membership by the offer of privileged information; the proffering of secrets.

Esotericism: Definitions

Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge

To the student of religion, there is more to esotericism than the keeping of secrets. It has become, both within the discipline and in general use, a word with several meanings. Wouter Hanegraaff outlines five common uses of the term: it may refer to any discourse that makes significant use of secrets; it may refer to topics that are speculative, metaphysical, and purposefully counter-culture; it may be synonymous with a gnostic strain in the history of religions; in perennialist thought it refers to the transcendent principle by which all religions are united; and it may pertain to a historically identifiable hermetic strain in Western religious practice.

The last is Hanegraaff's preferred definition, but the topic is potentially very broad indeed.¹ It is his first category that most interests us here, but it important to remember that none of the remaining definitions in his list preclude secretive practices. Useful as Hanegraaff's taxonomy is, its divisions are not rigid, and esotericism frequently manifests every one of his common uses. That is, a secretive organisation of speculative, counter-culture, gnostic perennialists with hermetic pretensions. The Rosicrucians, in their various forms, are very much so. Hanegraaff is also of the opinion that it is a mistake to try to represent esotericism without some dialogue between the scholarly etic method and the believer's emic understanding of the very point of his or her devotion. He is not alone in this, as will be discussed.

Faivre's six characteristics of esotericism address particular forms of thought. They are: correspondence; living nature; imagination and mediation; experience of transmutation; the practice of concordance; and transmission.² While maintaining that secrecy is not by itself enough to identify an esoteric movement, Faivre recognises secrecy as being among the consequences of esoteric practice and, in his usage, 'esotericism' is akin to 'gnosis', as per Hanegraaff's third definition, being the possession of a unique and penetrating perspective.

¹ W. Hanegraaff, 'Some Remarks on the Study of Esotericism', in *Esoterica: The Journal of Esoteric Studies*, at <http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/Hanegraaff.html> (accessed 04/03/03).

² A. Faivre and J. Needleman (eds.), *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, Crossroad, 1995, pp. xv - xix.

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In a recent article, Arthur Versluis claims that Faivre has not made enough use of the gnostic category.¹ Versluis is principally interested in that gnosis which defies description: an immanent apprehension of the divine which undercuts the ordinary object/subject knowledge distinction; ‘metaphysical gnosis,’ as he terms it. ‘Cosmological gnosis’ (Versluis’ term, again) is, however, made ample use of by Faivre, indeed it is present in almost all of his six characteristics. It is the special knowledge that esoteric groups possess and by which they claim to have a special purchase on the true order of things; the hidden significance of events both past and present, for example. Faivre considers the gnostic individual to be capable of translating this type of insight into doctrine for the sake of religious organisation.² In Faivre’s sense of the word, when we speak of esoteric movements or historical currents, we must consider this (cosmological) gnostic element.

In sympathy with Hanegraaff’s position, Versluis believes it is important to have imaginative sympathy with the esoteric view, not merely to *acknowledge* the existence of a gnostic element. Pierre Riffard likewise argues that the scholar must have some intimate understanding of the esoteric perspective; an appreciation of the gnosis of the believer. Traditional historical approaches are, to him, merely ‘external’ and he maintains that without a corresponding ‘internal’ view we are left with no more than a chronicle of superficially connected facts that teach us nothing of the meaning and purpose of such a history:

The external method, that of the historians, remains indispensable in the following fields: authorial authentication, dating, establishment of texts and restoration of works, understanding of the cultural milieu. Such precautions are instrumental in avoiding ravings and factual errors... The internal method, that of the esotericists, remains indispensable in some other fields: intention, structure, type, mode of

¹ A. Versluis, ‘What is Esoteric? Methods in the Study of Esotericism’, *Esoterica*, Vol. IV, 2002, at <http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeIV/Methods.htm> (accessed 17/01/03).

² A. Faivre, ‘Esotericism’, in M. Eliade, (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Macmillan, New York, 1987, Vol. 3, p. 158.

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ideation, mode of presentation, in other words: all that is related to meaning, and not to facts.¹

As much has been said about the study of religion in general,² but there is a danger, as Hanegraaff succinctly puts it, of confusing ‘the study of esotericism with the propagation of esotericism’.³ There can be no *a priori* objection to the application of an appropriate method, but when the methodology aims to construe the very field to which it is addressed then we are not studying a historical phenomenon at all, but rather a methodological one. ‘Truth is not a historical category’⁴ says Hanegraaff, summarising a methodological dilemma he concedes it is wiser to accept and control than try to eliminate. Narrative form and authorial expectation can colour the chronicle of facts with which the historian must work, and Hanegraaff warns that our picture of esotericism may be influenced by an *etic* methodology.

Problems in the Study of Secrecy

Versluis and Riffard, incorporating an *emic* perspective, have useful insights into the way esotericists think, but while scholars remain beyond the esoteric circle they cannot eliminate the putative weaknesses of the external view. Certainly, the historian’s explanatory power is increased by adding the perspective of those who actually participate, but where that necessary insight remains inaccessible there can be no assurance that we are being as sympathetic as we imagine. If we believe as strongly as Versluis that esotericism is defined principally by the possession and selective dissemination of gnosis,⁵ where that knowledge is ‘metaphysical’ we are left in a situation where the terms ‘esoteric’ and ‘secret’ are justifiably synonymous and, as Hugh Urban asks:

1 P. Riffard, ‘The Esoteric Method,’ in A. Faivre, and W. Hanegraaff, (eds.) *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion*, Peeters, Leuven, 1998, p. 73.

2 E. J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion, A History*, Duckworth, London, 1994, p. 248.

3 W. Hanegraaff, ‘On the Construction of “Esoteric Traditions”’, in Faivre and Hanegraaff (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 28.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

5 Versluis, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

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[H]ow can one study or say anything intelligent at all about a religious tradition that practices *active dissimulation*, that is, a religious tradition that deliberately obfuscates its teachings and intentionally conceals itself from outsiders?¹

Metaphysical gnosis, however inadvertently, presents that same insurmountable problem for the scholar, as such experiences defy description: one cannot *imagine* an irreducibly unique experience, and a 'direct spiritual insight into complete transcendence'² would be hard to place in a methodology that requires the object/subject distinction.

Urban's compromise is that while it may be impossible or unethical to study the content of the secrets that esotericists keep, we can, with comparative ease, study and report on the effect that the possession of secrets has on those who possess them. The Rosicrucian movement, if it can be called a single movement, has promoted itself to prospective members with the lure of secrets and is therefore a useful example with which to consider the consequences of organisational secrecy.

Rosicrucian History

In the early part of the seventeenth century, three mysterious documents appeared. The first, entitled *Fama Fraternitatis*,³ had possibly been in existence since 1610,⁴ but did not come to prominence until 1614. Its cryptic prose details the history of Christian Rosencreutz, including his journeys to the East to acquire arcane knowledge and, upon his return, the formation of a brotherhood for charitable purposes, in particular the healing of the sick. The document is also a scathing account of the society to which it is addressed: one spiritually adrift, and with a slavish

¹ H. Urban, 'The Torment of Secrecy: Ethical and Epistemological Problems in the Study of Esoteric Traditions', in *History of Religions*, Vol. 37, No. 3, 1998, p. 209.

² Versluis, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

³ Full title: *Fama Fraternitatis, dess Loblichen Ordens des Rosenkreutzes* (The Declaration of the Worthy Order of the Rosy Cross). C. McIntosh, *The Rosy Cross Unveiled: The History, Mythology and Rituals of an Occult Order*, The Aquarian Press Limited, 1980, p. 19.

⁴ F. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., London, 1986, p. 41.

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attitude to papal authority, the latter criticism being more forcefully expressed in the second of the manifestos, the *Confessio Fraternitatis*.¹ Its second paragraph begins:

Although we cannot be by any suspected of the least heresy, or of any wicked beginning, or purpose against the worldly government, we do condemn the East and the West (meaning the Pope and Mahomet) blasphemers against our Lord Jesus Christ.²

As well as proclaiming the existence of the secret brotherhood of the Rose Cross and the history of its founder, the manifestos call for seekers of truth to join the brothers R.C. for the sake of inaugurating a new era of proper Christian enlightenment:

What think you, loving people, and how seem you affected, seeing that you now understand and know, that we acknowledge ourselves truly and sincerely to profess Christ, condemn the Pope, addict ourselves to the true Philosophy, lead a Christian life, and daily call, entreat and invite many more unto our Fraternity, unto whom the same Light of God likewise appeareth?... Certainly if you will perform the same, this profit will follow, that all those goods which Nature hath in all parts of the world wonderfully dispersed, shall at one time altogether be given unto you, and shall easily disburden you of all that which obscureth the understanding of man, and hindereth the working thereof, like unto the vain eccentrics and epicycles.³

Although the pamphlets' authorship is uncertain, the most likely candidate would seem to be Johann Valentin Andreae, who at the very least was involved with the Rose Cross Fraternity at a later stage, and who almost certainly wrote the third of the Rosicrucian pamphlets, the *Chemical Wedding*.⁴ This last document repeats the ideology of the previous Rosicrucian publications in allegorical form with Christian

¹ Full title: *The Confession of the Laudable Fraternity of the Most Honourable Order of the Rosy Cross, Written to All the Learned of Europe*, in Yates, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

² Author unknown, *Confessio Fraternitatis*, in Yates, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 259.

⁴ Originally published in Germany under the title of *Die Chymische Hochzeit Christiani Rosenkreutz*. In McIntosh, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

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Rosencreutz as its imagined eyewitness. Most probably, it is a revision of an earlier work by Andreae of a similar title, described in his autobiography as a *ludibrium*, a fiction, or a jest of little worth.¹ Later to become a Lutheran pastor, Andreae also:

In spite of endless disasters..., was supported all his life by hopes of some far-reaching solution of the religious situation. All his activities, whether as a devout Lutheran pastor with socialist interests, or as the propagator of 'Rosicrucian' fantasies, were directed towards such a hope.²

The plan for realising that hope is expressed in the Rosicrucian manifestos. In addition to his Protestant leanings, Andreae believed in the value of a subterranean 'ancient wisdom', and the pamphlets encourage the continuation of a learned tradition maintained only by a diligent few.

The early Rosicrucian idea seems to have been derived from the Hermetic and Cabalistic traditions of the Renaissance. Whether or not they were meant to be taken literally, the legends of the philosopher's stone, the elixir of life, and the existence of the brotherhood itself all hinted at social, political and spiritual transformation³ and it appears that the response to these early publications was enthusiastic. Yet despite this early interest, those who were inspired enough to contact the fraternity in the manner suggested received nothing in return. Most famously disappointed were the philosophers Leibniz⁴ and Descartes:

Many people tried to join the order by writing and publishing sympathetic replies, the method suggested in the *Fama...* But no

¹ Yates, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

² *Ibid.*, p. 31.

³ M. Roberts, *Gothic Immortals: The Fiction of the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross*, Routledge, 1990, p. 6.

⁴ Leibniz is a good example of one who absorbed Rosicrucian ideas without being a part of the supposed fraternity. According to Yates, 'There is a persistent rumour that Leibniz joined a Rosicrucian Society at Nuremberg in 1666, and there is the better authenticated report that Leibniz knew that the Rosicrucian Fraternity was a fiction, having been told this by "Helmont" (probably Francis Mercury Van Helmont)', Yates, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

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further communication emanated from the fraternity other than its supplementary publications, the *Confession* and (if it is so regarded) the *Chemical Wedding*. So far as we know, all the would-be members were disappointed. Descartes, who was living at Frankfurt in 1619, vainly tried to get in touch, and decided that the fraternity did not exist. At the end of the century, the famous German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried von Leibniz wrote, 'I suspect that the Brethren of the Rosy Cross are a fiction'.¹

Perhaps those fortunate enough to encounter a member of the fraternity were quickly involved and bound by the group's clandestine *modus operandi*, and there is certainly no public evidence of any social body behind the Rosicrucian manifestos.² Yet it seems the mere idea of the Rosicrucian order inspired the formation of several societies of the same name informed by the ideas expressed in the *Fama*, the *Confessio*, and the *Chemical Wedding*.³ In 1623 there appeared in Paris placards bearing the following message:

We, the deputies of our Head College of the Rosy Cross, now sojourning, visible and invisible, in this town, by grace of the Most High, towards Whom the ears of sages turn, do teach, without the help of books of signs, how to speak the language of every country wherein we elect to stay, in order that we may rescue our fellow men from the error of death.⁴

To this day similar claims are made to the Rosicrucian heritage that are, so far, impossible to verify. If there is a consistent Rosicrucian lineage,

¹ M. Jones, 'The Rosicrucians', in N. Mackenzie (ed.), *Secret Societies*, Aldus, London, 1967, p. 140.

² According to Jones, '[t]he authors gave no clues to their identity, beyond the assurance that they were Lutherans. But in spite of this, and in spite of its obscure symbolism, the *Fama* was received by intellectuals with something of the excitement that might mark the publication of a revolutionary political manifesto today. It was read not only in Germany, but also in other European countries; in three years it ran into nine different editions, as well as several translations into Latin and Dutch,' *Ibid.*, p. 139.

³ Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

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nobody save its actual members has had any experience of it that they can share with the rest of the world.¹ Nevertheless, the *ideas* of Rosicrucianism have at least been persistent and were carried in the seventeenth century by such figures as Michael Maier (1568-1622), Robert Fludd (1574-1637), and Elias Ashmole (1617-1692) who is thought to have introduced Rosicrucian ideas into Freemasonry, a trend that continued well into the eighteenth century.

Although during the eighteenth century many ritualistic innovations were made to Rosicrucian practice, some borrowed from alchemical symbolism,² Rosicrucianism was virtually unheard of again until the nineteenth century when there were attempts at a revival. Although not the only example, the Societa Rosicruciana was founded later that century by Robert Wentworth Little and did much to ensure the re-emergence of the movement.³ Also in the nineteenth century the Order of the Golden Dawn⁴ adopted ideas from the Rosicrucian story and its members included Aleister Crowley and W.B. Yeats (in whose work can be seen the Rosicrucian strain).⁵ The Anthroposophical Society, and Rudolf Steiner in particular, also inherited ideas from the Order.

At present, in the U.S.A. there are at least eight self-proclaimed Rosicrucian organisations.⁶ The Fraternitatis Rosae Crucis, founded in

¹ Interestingly the same situation has existed since the Graeco-Roman world. M. W. Meyer (ed.), *The Ancient Mysteries*, Harper and Row, 1987, observes in his 'Introduction' that the term 'mystery' comes from the Greek *myein*, meaning 'to close': 'an initiate, or *mystes* (plural, *mystai*) into the *mysterion* was required to keep his or her lips closed and not divulge the secret that was revealed at the private ceremony. Vows of silence were meant to ensure that the initiate would keep the holy secret from being revealed to outsiders. Most *mystai* observed their pledge of secrecy, and as a result we possess little information about the central feature of the mysteries', p. 4.

² Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

³ H. Fogarty, 'Rosicrucians', in Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 476.

⁴ M. Roberts and H. Ormsby-Lennon (eds), *Secret Texts: The Literature of Secret Societies*, AMS Press, 1995, p. 271.

⁵ According to Colin Wilson, 'in 1895, W.B. wrote an essay entitled "The Body of the Father Christian Rosencrucx", which begins by describing how the founder of Rosicrucianism was laid in a noble tomb, surrounded by inextinguishable lamps, where he lay for many generations [and] goes on to attack modern criticism for entombing the imagination. . . ' McIntosh, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁶ J. G. Melton, *Encyclopedic Handbook of Cults in America: Revised and Updated Edition*, Garland Publishing, 1992, pp. 99-106.

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1858 by Pascal Beverly Randolph, is the oldest of the still-existing orders. The Societa Rosicruciana in Civitatibus Foederatis (S.R.I.C.F.) was founded in 1880 and its first Supreme Magus was Charles E. Meyer. The S.R.I.C.F. has links with Freemasonry, and to this day one must be a Mason to Join. The Societas Rosicruciana in America (S.R.I.A.) was begun in 1907 by Sylvester G. Gould, a former member of the S.R.I.C.F., who wished to open the fraternity to non-Masons.¹

The largest existing Rosicrucian order in America is the Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis, usually abbreviated AMORC. It owes its existence to a New York businessman, Harvey Spencer Lewis, who gained permission in 1909 from a Rosicrucian society in France to establish a parallel organisation, which he eventually did in 1915. The Rosicrucian Fellowship is also popular and is one that has a direct historical connection to the Theosophical society. It was founded by Max Heindel in 1907, who was formerly a theosophical lecturer. On a trip to Germany he was visited by what he described as an 'Elder Brother of the Rosicrucian Order' who sent him to work with a knowledgeable teacher many believe to be Rudolf Steiner.

Breaking from the Rosicrucian Fellowship, S. R. Parchment established the Rosicrucian Anthroposophic League in San Francisco in the 1930s. As with AMORC and the Rosicrucian Fellowship, the Anthroposophic League offers mail-order self-improvement courses. The Lectorium Rosicrucianum also stems from the Rosicrucian Fellowship and was founded by J. Van Rijckenborgh in Holland in 1971. It has offices in California and New York. Finally, the Ausar Auset Society exists to apply Rosicrucian insights to the Afro-American situation. It was formed in 1980 by R.A. Straughn, whose religious name is Ra Un Nefer Amen, and who had been a member of the Rosicrucian Anthroposophic League in the 1970's.

On the Uses of Secrecy

What should be apparent by now is that anyone can claim possession of a history of which there is no public trace, and such is the case with the present Rosicrucian societies. As has been mentioned, some do have

¹ *Loc. cit.*

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historical links with each other,¹ but none seem able or willing to prove a continuous chain of membership anchored in the society proclaimed in the early seventeenth century. Now, as then, the only thing that binds one type of Rosicrucian to the next is an idea of religious innovation and a claim to an ancient wisdom.

To a practicing Rosicrucian, this may not be as difficult as it is for the *etic*-minded scholar, considering that the esoteric view is frequently that history is only truly understood with the aid of gnosis.² Again summarising the unique difficulties that face the student of esotericism, according to Versluis:

[W]hile the conventional historian must work with rather straightforward historical data - dates, events, major figures - to this the historian of esotericism must also confront an entirely new additional dimension that we may as well describe from the outset as gnosis. This dimension cannot be addressed by conventional history alone, precisely because gnosis represents insight into that which is held to transcend history.³

Those of us not privy to special understanding are in an impossible position, as the esoteric demand is that our observations must be ratified by members of the group in question. We cannot even approach objectivity in such a case, and instead risk only disseminating esoteric doctrine. But before we accuse the secretive of deliberately manipulating the situation, it is important to consider other, less sinister, benefits for the group itself. For example, apart from privileging esoteric claims, historical revisionism also has a socially cohesive effect:

Another means of holding the group together is a specially created story of its origins. Sometimes these legends are traditional, and sometimes they are created to give a new society a claim to ancient lineage. It is hard to say how far the rank-and-file members take

¹ The S.R.I.A. stems from the S.R.I.C.F.; the Rosicrucian Fellowship gave rise to the Rosicrucian Anthroposophic League, the Lectorium Rosicrucianum and, indirectly, the Ausar Auset Society; and the Rosicrucian Fellowship may be linked to the Order of the Golden Dawn via Rudolf Steiner.

² Riffard, *op. cit.*, pp. 65ff.

³ Versluis, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

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such myths seriously, and how far they are accepted as part of the collective fantasy that binds the solidarity of the group.¹

But even here there exists the difficulty that the 'author' will not openly discuss, and thereby mitigate through discourse, any misleading predispositions. The *emic-etic* dialectic that Hanegraaff recommends is made impossible, and we can note the additional problem that there are as many histories as there are esoteric groups, even those claiming the same heritage, as is the case here.

AMORC, for one, employs an esoteric historiography that, at the very least, precludes the critical scrutiny of the outsider. The uninitiated can only accept the esotericist's claim to be taken seriously if he or she does so on faith, as it were. In the absence of faith, however, we can observe and comment on secrecy as a method and on the effects of its usage. Secrecy, Urban suggests:

... is better understood, not in terms of its content or substance – which is ultimately unknowable, if there even is one – but rather in terms of its *forms* or *strategies* – the tactics by which social agents conceal or reveal, hoard or exchange, certain valued information. In this sense, secrecy is a discursive strategy that transforms a given piece of knowledge into a scarce and precious resource, a valuable commodity, the possession of which in turn bestows status, prestige, or symbolic capital on its owner.²

The difficulty in evaluating secrecy is that the content of the secret itself is the measure of the worth of its keeping. There is as likely to be forbidden knowledge in which we can have no justifiable interest as there is to be a secret matter it would be in our best interest to know. Because of this two-pronged potential, the mere awareness of secrecy provides a strong motivation to act. It took only the advertisement of the mysterious history of Christian Rosencreutz to generate considerable interest in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. And today ongoing subscriptions to Rosicrucian courses are justified by little more than the ambiguous promise of 'profound wisdom'. It is not necessary to

¹ Mackenzie, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

² Urban, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

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demonstrate that such offers are empty in order to show that the promise alone is sufficient to inspire participation.

And it is not simply a matter of exploiting credulity. There is also in secrecy a link to the human desire for privacy, and this may also go some way to explain the behaviour of secret societies. On the relationship between secrecy and privacy, Norman Mackenzie suggests that:

Without a degree of secrecy there would be no privacy, and without some semblance of privacy it would be impossible for human beings to live in society or to develop distinct personalities... Secrecy, that is to say, is a condition of the individual's sense of identity.¹

Likewise, societies maintain identity more easily by a segregation of opinion. This tactic is especially easy to understand when the most valuable beliefs of the community in question are at odds with the rest of the world. Where opinion and practice are so alien as to inspire incomprehension and, at worse, hostility in the outsider, secrecy removes the need of ever having to take the risk of confrontation. It is useful to such a degree that, as Mackenzie puts it, '[w]e can say that without secrecy, the organization could not exist. It would either be destroyed by its enemies, or be unable to perform its allotted role, or simply fail to hold its members'.²

Furthermore, Faivre argues that the nature of esoteric knowledge does not lend itself to exposure or immediate comprehension 'but must be the object of a progressive penetration at several levels by each seeker of knowledge'.³ Thus, the motivation for secrecy is not merely to hide

¹ Mackenzie, *op. cit.*, p. 11. This is supported by the historical investigation of pre-modern psychology. Medieval societies, for example, did not include the self-determining individual, as there was no practical way that privacy could be enjoyed. With no privacy, there was no opportunity for individual psychology to develop in the way we presently take for granted: 'The individual, caught in a relatively intense social network of a decentralised manorial system, did not – to the best of our knowledge – develop the resources necessary to have a strong, conscious sense of himself', J. Bensman and R. Lilienfeld, *Between Public and Private: The Lost Boundaries of the Self*, Macmillan Publishing Co., 1979, p. 29.

² Mackenzie, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-14.

³ A. Faivre, 'Esotericism', in Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

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knowledge, nor to artificially raise its value, but to create an atmosphere where empathetic individuals can communicate ideas elusive or apparently ridiculous in the everyday world.¹ Faivre continues that:

The sacred, that which is set apart, requires a slender partition between itself and the secular world. One feels obliged to prevent the desecration of that which one values most highly and which was obtained only with difficulty through submitting to diverse trials.²

The suggestion is that inestimable religious insight should be shown appropriate reverence. We should perhaps be surprised that more of the devout are not so secretive. Parts of the early Rosicrucian manifestos are written as if so inspired: ‘for fear of the abuse by the evil and ungodly world’.³

Urban applied to the Rosicrucian Case

Despite the more ingenuous motives behind esoteric practices, however, there is a human weakness for secrecy easily abused; and, as Urban suggests, a society can be energised and organised on the mere potential of what may never be known. By his reckoning, there are two processes in the making of an economy of secrets: the strict guarding of information, which transforms information into a scarce and desirable resource; and the use of secrets as ‘a source of “symbolic capital...,” as a form of status and power accumulated by social actors and recognized as “legitimate” in a given social field’.⁴ Secrecy can then be traded as one would other forms of currency.

The appeal of the first Rosicrucian publications depends on a human liking of intrigue, and the proclamation of the existence of specific hidden knowledge appears to have done as Urban suggests by creating the existence of a desirable and scarce commodity. The evidence

1 *Loc. cit.* Or, from the mouth of AMORC ‘The Adept only converses at his or her best with the Adept’, Author Unknown, *An Introduction to A.M.O.R.C.*, Official Publication, n.d., p. 10. Quotation attributed to Elbert Hubbard, Rosicrucian.

2 *Loc. cit.*

3 Anon, *Fama Fraternitatis*, in Yates, *op. cit.*, pp. 246-247.

4 Urban, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

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considerable contemporary interest shows as much. The author, or authors, of the early publications did not only invite the pursuit of great knowledge, the offer was to join a society uniquely in possession of it. Readers of the pamphlets were also promised that if they abandoned what passed for learning in a spiritually barren world and joined with the Rosicrucian Fraternity, they would become part of a social reformation through knowledge of God.¹ Furthermore, the proclamation was elitist as not all were worthy to respond. Rather, if one could find a Rosicrucian and understand his ideas, one would have been marked by God as exceptionally capable. Quite apart from the substance of these claims and promises, what appeals to the reader is the offer of exclusive power:

Wherefore if the unworthy cry and call a thousand times, or if they shall offer and present themselves to us a thousand times, yet God hath commanded our ears, that they should hear none of them: yea God had so compassed us about with his clouds, that unto us his servants no violence or force can be done or committed; wherefore we neither can be seen or known by anybody, except he had the eyes of an eagle.²

The technique has remained the same to this day. To cite one example, the Ancient Mystical Order Rosae Crucis (AMORC) advertises itself using promises similar to those used by its seventeenth-century predecessor. One might occasionally see a small advertisement in a new-age publication offering self-development techniques and knowledge with which life may be understood anew. The message is repeated on their website:

Since 1915, hundreds of thousands of Rosicrucians students throughout the world have enhanced their lives and learned to access their own inner vision through our home study course in mysticism, metaphysics, and philosophy. Our time-tested system reveals the underlying principles of the universe, an easy-to-understand language that guides you step-by-step through the process of mystical

¹ Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

² Anon, *Confessio Fraternitatis*, in Yates, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

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development... the Rosicrucian Order offers the world's foremost system of instruction and guidance for exploring the inner-self and discovering the universal laws that govern all human endeavour.¹

More than three hundred years after those early frustrated attempts to locate a living Rosicrucian, there are now identifiable bodies behind the offer, the history of which has briefly been mentioned. But, typically, for those who respond, all that is advanced is more of the same. The same promises, claims, and esoteric historiography, but with a narrower focus on self-development in contrast to its progenitor. For example:

The lineage of the Rosicrucian movement can be traced from its beginnings in the mystery schools of ancient Egypt founded by Pharaoh Thutmose III (1500 to 1447 B.C.), and more particularly from his grandson Pharaoh Amenhotep IV (also known as Akhnaton) – through to the Greek philosophers such as Thales and Pythagoras, the Roman philosopher Plotinus, and others, who journeyed to Egypt and were initiated into the mystery schools – through to the symbolism hidden in the love songs of Troubadours, the formularies of Alchemists, the symbolical system known as the Qabala, and the rituals of Orders of Knighthood during the dark and dangerous times of medieval Europe.²

And:

In every human being there resides a deeper nature or personality of almost unbelievable potential, a nature of considerable sophistication, refinement and capacity for development.³

Conspicuously, the AMORC pamphlets differ from *Fama* and the *Confessio* in their deliberate abandonment of the Christian world-view. AMORC wants to distance itself from certain 'religious' associations,⁴

1 www.amorc.org (accessed 04/03/03).

2 *Mastery of Life*, Official AMORC publication, n.d., p. 19.

3 *Ibid*, p. 3.

4 'The Rosicrucian Order is not the only way to enlightenment, but it is quite possibly the surest and most comprehensive way available today. The Order does not dictate what its members should believe and no one need ever give up his or her religious or

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but more specifically they deny the Christian heritage to which their predecessors so manifestly belong. Commenting on the rose cross itself, AMORC claims that:

There is no religious connotation associated with this symbol; the Rosy Cross symbol predates Christianity. The cross symbolically represents the human body and the rose represents the individual's unfolding consciousness.¹

Strange, then, that whoever wrote the *Fama* should be so preoccupied with Christian reform.² The implication is that nowadays the secret possessed is accessible to anyone with the right attitude and not, as in the original manifestos, only to those chosen by God. Clearly, this has more appeal in a secular, individualistic society whose members yet retain unfocused religious desires. As with any advertisement, its appeal is tailored for its audience. In the seventeenth century, the enduring need for religious innovation which followed the incomplete success of the reformation, and a growing interest in the revelations of the natural sciences provided a public well primed for the promises hinted at in the early pamphlets. These days, people's needs and expectations are quite different and the AMORC publications are suited to contemporary views:

Designed, in fact, to reach people who have expressed an interest and taken the initiative to secure it, the pamphlet is not on sale at bookstalls or shops. Its tone is confidential and personal, its appeal not to 'The learned and the great,' but to the common man with (it is suggested) an hour or so a week to devote to Rosicrucianism. The reader is promised the opportunity to reshape his life, and invited to become a student member by sending a fee to his regional office. He is assured that the teachings are within the grasp of 'anyone able to

philosophical convictions. Though AMORC does touch upon matters which could be construed as being of a religious nature, the Order itself is not a religion and has no dogmas.' *Mastery of Life*, Official AMORC publication, n.d., p. 5.

¹ *Ibid*, p. 19.

² For example, 'But that also every Christian may know of what religion and belief we are, we confess to have the knowledge of Jesus Christ.' Anon, *Fama Fraternitatis*, in Yates, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

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read and understand his daily newspaper' – a far cry from the rarefied wisdom of which the *Fama Fraternitatis* spoke.¹

What can be observed now, that could not be seen then, is what Urban notices of secret societies' tendency to create hierarchies. Again, those of us beyond the sacred hoop can only speculate on the true reasons for its organisational structure, but there are clear economic advantages to this development, as Urban suggests:

[T]he practice of secrecy naturally lends itself to the construction of hierarchies: it is a basic strategy of masking and mystification, which simultaneously conceals the numerical insignificance of the elite, while exaggerating their aura of power, awe, or mystery.²

Not surprisingly, then, the initiate is offered by AMORC only the first level in their hierarchy of exclusive understanding: the Neophyte Section. There are then three 'Atrium' levels where the promise is that, 'As you become more attuned with your inner source of wisdom, you'll become more receptive to the subtle inner promptings of intuition, inspiration and illumination'.³ Finally, there are nine 'Temple Degrees' where the individual is offered 'the opportunity to utilise the highest metaphysical powers in practical ways'.⁴ Were there evidence of a coherent fraternity in the seventeenth century, there may also be signs of a similar organisational structure. Perhaps the historical connection Rosicrucianism has with Freemasonry, and what is known of the latter's hierarchy of members, is a clue to what might have been the case.

Concluding Remarks

At the start of the Rosicrucian saga, the *Fama Fraternitatis*, the *Confessio Fraternitatis*, and *The Chemical Wedding*, all proclaimed the

¹ Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

² Urban, *op. cit.*, p. 245. On secrecy's identical role in a secular/military context cf. Carl Sagan, *The Demon Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*, Headline Book Publishing, 1996, p. 87.

³ *Mastery of Life*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 15.

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existence of an order of men possessing secret knowledge relevant to the times. They spoke of ancient wisdom offering understanding of nature through knowledge and proximity to God. The more recent manifestations of the tradition simultaneously claim to be the descendants of the original Rosicrucians, yet promise a secret whose focus is of another sort: it is no longer God who must be understood, but the self and its seemingly boundless potential. Rosicrucianism has been transformed from a perennialist Protestantism into a self-seeking ideology with obvious appeal to the New-Age movement and to individualism in general. The lure of secrecy is being applied in both cases and in each case it is couched in whatever metaphysic most suits the expected audience.

Even while we might speculate on more ingenuous motives for secrecy, until we know the secret itself, we cannot conclude the value of such practices. And despite the sympathetic insight expected of us by the theorists mentioned, it is hard not to speculate with a cynical eye on the wisdom of the Rosicrucians as they have become. Admittedly, the external view has intrinsic limitations, but what remains to be seen suggests an institution less concerned with an enduring and ancient truth than with a popular philosophy turned to the purpose of historical revision for the sake of its own prestige. The disparity between the promises offered by the early Rosicrucian manifestos and that which is offered by AMORC suggests that what is most important in this esoteric culture is not the content of secret knowledge, but the withholding of it. Offered in all cases is life-transforming information that only the gifted or those specially prepared may receive.

This observation is not intended specifically to rubbish the Rosicrucian project – after all, the comparison is only between the first manifestoes and AMORC – but to emphasise the greater importance of secrecy as a method over the content of the secret itself in these examples. Whether we take the esoteric view that an exclusive environment of understanding must be cultivated for the sake of gnosis, or the view that privileging information is entirely for the sake of power relationships within religious hierarchies, we cannot ignore the manifestation of a culture in which secrecy itself is of the greatest importance.