



**Renko D. Geffarth.** *Religion und arkane Hierarchie: Der Orden der Gold- und Rosenkreuzer als geheime Kirche im 18. Jahrhundert.* Texts and Studies in Western Esotericism. Leiden: Brill, 2007. x + 360 pp. \$232.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-15667-8.



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## Beyond Dan Brown

Secret societies make easy targets for speculative studies and popular fiction. Luckily for serious historians, however, organizations like the freemasons and the Rosicrucian Order have left significant trails of evidence. While very good scholarship on many aspects of European freemasonry already exists, serious studies of the eighteenth-century Rosicrucian Order, which extended throughout many regions of the Holy Roman Empire and into eastern Europe and Russia, are not as well developed. The volume under review makes an academically serious, weighty, archive-based addition to this scholarship. Although the main audience for the study consists of scholars interested in secret societies and esoteric beliefs, broader audiences interested in early modern religious diversity and social interaction will also find Renko D. Geffarth's work valuable and thought-provoking.

The specific subject of this study is the northern and eastern German circles of the Rosicrucian Order, which existed from around 1760 until sometime after 1790. Although short-lived, the order had historical links with at least two long-standing phenomena: liter-

ary and philosophical Rosicrucianism of the early seventeenth century, and continental European freemasonry, which had thrived in various forms since the first half of the eighteenth century. While Rosicrucian "circles"—the order's local organizational units—were found in many separate centers, the great majority of Rosicrucian primary sources for north and central German territories are found today in the freemason collection at the Geheimes Staatsarchiv PreuÅischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin. Geffarth estimates that approximately 350 sources survive in the collection. They include religious and alchemical manuscripts, ceremonial manuals outlining such things as the Rosicrucian system of nine degrees of initiation, internal histories, members' correspondence, membership lists, meeting protocols and other administrative texts, and illustrations.

Geffarth uses his sources to contribute to the study both of Enlightenment sociability and of early modern religion. Chapter 4 ("Hierarchie") is the author's main contribution to the first subject. In it, he examines the organization, administration, and networks

of members across northern and eastern German territories. The Rosicrucian membership was drawn from among Germany's elites. These included noblemen, most notably Friedrich Wilhelm II of Prussia, but also military men and bureaucrats (together the largest proportion), clergymen, and prominent merchants and tradesmen. A large proportion was Lutheran, but the circles also included Reformed, Catholic, and Greek Orthodox members. Geffarth concludes: "Insofern war dieser Geheimbund tatsächlich ein Raum, in dem die Ständeordnung des Alten Reichs wenigstens teilweise außer Kraft gesetzt war, wie es schon Reinhart Koselleck im Kontext seiner klassischen Deutung der Funktion der geheimen Gesellschaften im 18. Jahrhundert nahegelegt hat" (p. 162). One of the strengths of Geffarth's study is the attention he pays to the inner functioning of this secret society. He analyzes its hierarchical and disciplinary structures and the strategies members used (such as pseudonyms and secret writing systems) to preserve the group's distinctness. Chapter 4 ends with a discussion of opponents, traitors, and renegades.

Overall, Geffarth situates his analysis of Rosicrucian sociability in contrast to scholarship that argues that groups like the Rosicrucian Order constituted anti-Enlightenment organizations. Instead, in his introduction he cites the work of researchers like Holger Zanzuf, which demonstrates that significant numbers of those active in Enlightenment societies for social improvement and philosophical inquiry also belonged to esoteric or secret societies like the freemasons and Rosicrucians.[1] I am sympathetic to Geffarth's efforts to contribute to historiography that locates the study of esoteric societies within the wider field of Enlightenment sociability rather than merely assuming a fundamental tension between esotericism and Enlightenment. However, perhaps because Geffarth relies on sources that provide evidence for the internal functioning of the order and the beliefs of its members, he does not write much in the main body of his book about activities of Rosicrucian Order members in other Enlightenment societies. Further consideration of the relationship between esoteric societies and the Enlightenment would nonetheless have been desirable.

To illustrate what I mean, it is worth saying a little about one of Geffarth's main subjects, Johann Christoph Wöllner, the prominent Berlin-based Rosicrucian leader and influential minister in King Friedrich Wilhelm II's government in the late 1780s and into the 1790s. At one point, Geffarth notes that Wöllner was not only a freemason and Rosicrucian, but also

an active contributor to publications with Enlightenment themes. However, not only does he omit bibliographical details to support this observation and analysis of this Enlightenment literature, but in a later part of the book, he also writes that while he was a government minister Wöllner engaged in the "Bekämpfung aufklärerischer Kräfte wie des Illuminatenordens" (p. 270). In his contextualization of this claim, Geffarth emphasizes his view that even during Wöllner's period of political influence in Prussia, the order never pursued a coherent political program (a major and oft-repeated theme of his work), and that to the extent individual members did have political goals these were subordinated to the religious goal of spreading Rosicrucian beliefs. I understand part of the implication of this assertion to be that the order did not have overtly politically conspiratorial intentions or a necessarily anti-Enlightenment orientation. This kind of conclusion is quite ambivalent. Here and in other places, Geffarth could have said more about how he sees the Rosicrucians fitting into the complex intellectual and social landscapes of the European Enlightenment. For example, I would be interested in Geffarth's thoughts, were he to write more on the Rosicrucian Order, about Jonathan Israel's challenging and controversial new interpretation of the Enlightenment, which defines it in the first place not in terms of patterns of sociability but rather in terms of competing sets of ideas.[2] Rosicrucians were certainly opposed to what Israel calls the "radical" Enlightenment, with its advocates' emphasis on anticlericalism, republicanism, freedom of thought, and philosophical materialism. My question for Geffarth would be how, if at all, he would orient the Rosicrucian Order within what Israel calls the "moderate" Enlightenment, a movement characterized by the attempts of many reformers to reconcile Enlightenment projects with established systems of social order and to balance faith and reason. In the present study, Geffarth does not cite any work by Israel.

On the second subject, early modern religion, Geffarth devotes significant space to the question of the relationship between the Rosicrucians' esotericism and Christianity. This relationship constitutes the main subject of his work. Among the author's basic historiographical claims is that early modern historians should adopt a broadened concept of religion. In addition to traditional forms of confessional religion, this broadened concept should include esoteric religion, which mainstream Christian churches defined as deviant. Geffarth uses the scholarship of Monika Neugebauer-Wölk, Antoine Faivre, and Wouter Hanegraaff, which reminds us

that early modern religion was not limited only to conventional, orthodox expressions and that new religious groups continued to emerge in Europe long after the Reformation, as a framework for his own claims.

In chapter 5 (“Religion”) Geffarth analyzes Rosicrucian beliefs and practices. These include the order’s system of nine degrees. Rosicrucians conceived of these levels of initiation as further steps on the path to arcane knowledge and wisdom that members took after first achieving a degree as a Master Mason (the third and highest level of conventional masonry), a further fourth degree as a Scottish Rite Master Mason, and for a time also a fifth degree in a short-lived order known as the *Theoretische Bräuder der Salomonischen Wissenschaft*. In Rosicrucian self-understanding, the order offered members the perfection of esoteric knowledge that they had begun to achieve in these subordinate organizations. In other words, Rosicrucians believed that their order was not merely a branch of freemasonry, but indeed its highest expression. What the Rosicrucian Order taught was that self-perfection was possible through the perfection of knowledge of God and nature. Sources for these beliefs included theosophical, alchemical, hermetic, cabbalistic, and biblical texts. Geffarth pays particular attention to what he calls “theosophy,” defined as religious practice involving three components: private study of alchemical and magical theories, collective rituals and ceremonies, and experiments in the order’s laboratories.

In chapter 6 (“Kirche”) Geffarth focuses more specifically on the relationship between Rosicrucian esotericism and Christianity. For analytical purposes he uses the ideal-typical model that Neugebauer-Wülk has proposed recently for conceptualizing the differences between esotericism and Christianity.[3] Starting from the assumption that in ideal-typical form each represents two ends of a polar opposition, Geffarth argues that the Rosicrucian Order fits somewhere in the middle. The reason is that just as the order’s leaders saw their organization as the highest expression of freemasonry, so they also understood themselves as the representatives of the highest expression of Christianity, in fact, the true heirs of the earliest, original, unblemished Christian congregation. In other words, contrary to the impression left in some scholarly statements, Rosicrucianism was not a form of Lutheran orthodoxy or Christian conservatism, but rather a brand of Christian heterodoxy.

Despite these conclusions, Geffarth resists categorizing the Rosicrucian Order as a “sect” or something similar. Instead, his central statement of argument for the

study is that, although the order had obvious differences from established Christian churches, it nonetheless took on hierarchical and religious forms that allow scholars to compare it in important ways to these churches. He proposes the concept of a “secret church” to highlight the sociological similarities and differences. His baseline for thinking about the order in these terms is the classical sociological category of “church” as outlined about a century ago by Ernst Troeltsch and others. Geffarth describes the definitional criteria for this category as universality, hierarchy of offices, support from secular authorities, and an internally rational system of belief. Of these criteria, only the first does not apply to the order, and it is because its membership was limited by privileged access to special knowledge that Geffarth prefers the qualified category of “secret church.” His reason for not adopting the related Troeltschian concept of “sect” to categorize the order is that he understands the central characteristic of this category to be a sect’s oppositional stance toward established authority, a criterion that the order—which counted among its ranks many well-established bureaucrats, military men, and noblemen—certainly does not meet. I am not convinced by this rationale. From a Troeltschian point of view, I am not sure that an oppositional orientation is as central to the definition of a sect as criteria such as voluntary membership, peer discipline, or perfectionist goals, all of which fit the Rosicrucian Order very nicely. After all, Mennonites and Quakers, key examples for Troeltsch of the sectarian typology, held oppositional orientations toward authority for only very brief periods of their long histories. A compromise category of “sectarian church” would probably not be a good alternative, because it would undermine the clarity that ideal types are supposed to help provide.

Instead of using already very old and clumsy categories for conceptualizing the socioreligious character of the order, why should scholars not consider orienting the study of groups like the Rosicrucians in the broader scholarly framework of “new religious movements”? An active and rich collection of empirical and theoretical literature is currently focused on this alternative to the categories of “cult” and “sect.”[4] One of the many advantages of this category is that it is not as limiting in artificial, ideal-typical terms as is the church-sect distinction. For example, while scholars in this field do recognize that new religious movements not infrequently hold views that seem not only unconventional but also threatening or dangerous to members of conventional society, they do not make the groups’ apparently opposi-

tional or dangerous character a defining characteristic. Instead, seen in terms of the category of new or emerging religious movements, one set of data that Geffarth provides stands out: of the thirty-seven Rosicrucian circles that he examines, only nine lasted for more than ten years, and the order as a whole lasted only about three or four decades. In his introduction, Geffarth makes a plea for an expanded understanding of religion in early modern studies that includes unconventional, esoteric groups. If early modernists interested in religion were to become familiar with the conceptual framework provided by scholarship on new religious movements, we as a scholarly community would certainly be taking a big step in the direction that Geffarth recommends.

## Notes

[1]. Holger ZaunstÄ¶ck, *SozietÄ¶tslandschaft und Mitgliederstrukturen: Die mitteldeutschen*

*AufklÄ¶rungsgesellschaften im 18. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999).

[2]. Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670-1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[3]. Monika Neugebauer-WÄ¶lk, "Esoterik und Christentum vor 1800: Prolegomena zu einer Bestimmung ihrer Differenz," *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 3 (2003): 127-165.

[4]. For an introduction to this field, see James R. Lewis, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Another major venue for research in this field is *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*.

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