

CHAPTER 1

Lectorium Rosicrucianum: A Dutch Movement Becomes International

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Methodology

The Lectorium Rosicrucianum (LR), a movement born in the Netherlands, enjoys today a remarkable international following. There are more than 15,000 pupils and 'members' in the world. (The 'members' are those awaiting admission as a pupil). More than half are in Europe, but the movement is also well established in countries outside Europe, including Brazil.

In order to study new religious movements (NMR) and those that I suggest be called 'new magical movements',¹ three methods are normally proposed. First, there is the 'religionist' approach, as Dutch scholar Wouter Hanegraaff calls it. It consists in assuming from the outset that a religious or spiritual doctrine is 'true' and in examining from this point of view what are the 'errors' and 'deviations' from the 'truth' contained in all other currents and movements.² The 'religionist' approach, applied respectively to the author's own group, or to others, results in apologetics or heresiology. Second, there is the 'anti-cult' approach. It is a secular version of the 'religionist' approach. It often claims to be interested in deeds, not in creeds. In fact, however, it compares each movement with the basic values of modernity such as rationality, conceived in a rather positivist manner;

1. See Introvigne 1990.
2. See Hanegraaff 1996.

and democracy, regarded as applicable to all fields of human life. If the movement deviates too much from these values it becomes a 'cult', labelled as 'destructive' or 'totalitarian' and stigmatized by an image of subversion. Scholars, on the other hand, try to adopt in most cases a 'value-free' approach. They try not to compare the values of a spiritual movement with those of the researcher or of the society at large, but only to analyse its main features within the appropriate context.

Of course the 'religionist' and the 'anti-cult' approach are not illegitimate in themselves. They can contribute to the debate and even address interesting questions. Yet, they cannot be accepted when they claim to present themselves as universal points of view. They also become dangerous when they ask the State to protect a majority religion, or a supposedly dominant ideology. The 'value-free' approach is of course conscious that it is ultimately impossible to present a position totally separated from all values. It accepts that the observer influences the perception of the observed phenomenon. However at least it tries, although it never succeeds completely, to present each religious movement from the standpoint of its own values. This is surely a different method from submitting the movement to an examination according to the criteria of the observer (whether they are presented or not as 'universal' criteria, which every 'reasonable person' surely would admit). Finally, the 'value-free' approach does not avoid comparisons (a point often not perceived by representatives of the 'anti-cult' approach). Contrary to the apologetic discourse, it tries to situate the given movement in its historical, social and religious contexts. It draws on parallels that may sometimes upset the members of the movement studied. They believe, as it is only normal, that their spiritual family is always 'unique', and its success depends on its privileged relation to the truth.

The Lectorium Rosicrucianum

I propose to give here a short overview of the LR. I will then situate it in its socio-religious context. I will also shortly ask questions (without really giving a final answer) on its sources of legitimization, and its relations with the New Age, and with post-modernity.

Movements that J. Gordon Melton attaches to the 'ancient wisdom'

family³ always have multiple references to the founding myths of the esoteric tradition, such as the 'wisdom from the East', Gnosticism, hermeticism, the Knights Templar, or the Rosicrucians. One can however identify sub-families with reference to a dominant myth. We may thus refer, among others, to a Rosicrucian sub-family, where the symbolism of the Rosy Cross predominates. Both Frances Yates and Roland Edighoffer⁴ have over the last few years given reliable historical accounts of the origins of the Rosy Cross and of its influence on the birth of modern Freemasonry. The first Rosicrucian societies, in the modern sense of the word, appeared at the end of the 18th century. Rosicrucian groups punctuated the esoteric revival of the 19th century: in France around Papus (Gérard Encausse, 1865-1916) and Joséphin Péladan (1858-1918), in England with the Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia, and in the United States with the Fraternitas Rosae Crucis of Pascal Beverly Randolph (1825-1875).⁵ The Rosicrucian movement continued into the 20th century, at first with Arnoldo Krumm-Heller (1876-1949),⁶ whose Fraternitas Rosicruciana Antiqua spread particularly in Latin America. Max Heindel (Carl Louis von Grasshoff, 1865-1938), a Danish-born German esotericist formed in the milieu of the Theosophical Society, created the Rosicrucian Fellowship in Los Angeles in 1907. In 1915, also in the United States, Harvey Spencer Lewis (1833-1939) established the AMORC, the Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis. Whilst AMORC experienced remarkable success, it has also experienced a number of schisms and problems in more recent years.

In the 1920s Jan Leene (1896-1968) and his brother Zwier Wilhelm Leene (1892-1938) became the most important leaders of Max Heindel's Rosicrucian Fellowship in the Netherlands.⁷ According to them, the birth of the present LR should be dated as 24 August 1924, a date that is held in high spiritual esteem by the movement. However the Leene brothers — who were joined in 1930 by Mrs H. Stok-

3. Melton 1996.

4. Yates 1972; Edighoffer 1994.

5. On Randolph, see Deveney 1997. On the various Rosicrucian movements, see Introvigne 1990, 184-215.

6. On Krumm-Heller, see König 1995.

7. On the origins of LR, see *Lectorium Rosicrucianum* 1989.

Huyser (1902-1990) — only declared their independence from the Rosicrucian Fellowship in 1935. After the premature death of the older of the two brothers in 1938, Jan Leene (using the pen-name Jan van Rijckenborgh) and Mrs Stok-Huyser (who signed as Catharose de Petri) began to put the doctrines of the movement into writing. When the Nazis entered Holland the movement was forbidden, its possessions confiscated and its temples razed. Several members, including Jewish members, found their death in the gas chambers. After the difficulties of the war the movement adopted the name LR in 1945.

Interested in Catharism, the two founders met Antonin Gadal (1871-1962) in France in 1948. Gadal was one of the key figures of the Cathar revival in our century.⁸ When a branch of the LR was created in France in 1957, Gadal became its first president. The statutes were established by Richard Dupuy, a notary public who at that time was the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge, one of the rival branches of French Freemasonry. At the same time the LR began to spread, first in Germany — where the Rosicrucian myth was as important as the Cathar tragedy in Southern France — and then in a number of other countries. The most notable success of the LR came after the death of van Rijckenborgh (1968) and of Catharose de Petri (1990), who were replaced by an International Spiritual Directorate. The approximately 15,000 adherents are divided into 14,000 ‘pupils’ and about a thousand ‘members’ (who, as mentioned earlier, await admission as pupils).

After a period of one or two years, the ‘pupils’ must engage themselves in a way of life where a ‘balance of consciousness’ is essential.⁹ From this engagement stems a research for mental, emotional and physical purification, encouraged by vegetarianism, and abstinence from alcohol, tobacco and drugs. There is also a clear reticence with regard to ‘unhealthy influences’, in particular those allegedly transmitted by television¹⁰ (a point which has already caused a lot of ink

8. See claims by Gadal 1980a, Gadal 1980b.

9. The most important textbooks of the LR are originally published in Dutch. English translations of key texts include van Rijckenborgh 1957; 1958; 1962; 1980; 1993; and de Petri 1995.

10. See, for an Italian example, Scuola Internazionale della Rosacroce d’Oro 1981. The booklet existed in various languages. Its distribution has now been discontinued.

to flow). To the outside observer, these reservations towards television continue to be seen as the most evident trait of the Lectorium. Critical observers would also focus on its belief in the unhealthy manipulation of the world of the living by the world of the dead (the 'reflective sphere') and by occult forces that are fed by erroneous thoughts and actions of both good and bad human beings.¹¹ In fact, we are confronted here with a process of identity claiming and boundary maintenance between pupils and non-pupils. The abstention from meat, alcohol, tobacco and television plays an important role for the LR, comparable to the 'word of wisdom' for the Mormons. Yet, the essence of the doctrine of the LR is not there.

In order to understand the LR it is crucial to refer to Gnosticism and to the Cathar tradition. The LR proposes a classical Gnostic dualism between the divine world (static) and the natural world (dialectic), of which the true God is not the creator. As Antoine Faivre has noted, it is difficult to reconcile this dualism with the Rosicrucian tradition.¹² The latter, at least in its 17th century origins, is not dualistic. The 'dialectical' world includes both the living and those dead that, in a state of dissolution, await a new incarnation. The latter can only be understood within the framework of the notion of man as a microcosm, a notion that has been largely developed by the LR. The popular theories of the reincarnation of the personal ego are refuted. The only function of the ego consciousness is in fact to sacrifice itself for the 'resurrection of the original soul', the divine spark to be found at the heart of the human microcosm. The so-called 'living', which we are, having forgotten their divine origin are imprisoned in this dualist and absurd world. Yet, they possess a 'spirit spark atom', which manifests itself in many as a remembrance or pre-remembrance and nostalgia. The path of transfiguration as proposed by the LR aims to awaken the divine spark ('the rose of the heart') and to lead humans back to their original condition.

One finds here the classical picture of all forms of Gnosticism. Yet, this Gnosticism organizes itself according to a language and models that are often taken directly from the Cathar tradition. Over and above the debate on the role of Gadal and his neo-Catharism, the dual-

11. See van Rijckenborgh 1958.

12. Faivre 1996, 246-54.

ism of the LR and that of the Cathars (which according to Anne Brenon developed gradually)¹³ is remarkably similar. The dualism of the LR (as that of the Cathars) is not only to be found in their cosmology, but also inspires human behaviour. Actions can help to progress towards transfiguration or, on the contrary, further imprison humans in the dialectic field. The LR provides an esoteric interpretation of man and his body. It also presents a vision of the future. Here, one finds texts on the coming of a false Christ and Armageddon that may be regarded as millennialist or apocalyptic. These labels are meaningful only if one defines clearly in what sense the terms may be used within the frame of a Gnostic worldview. In fact, one can apply several conclusions to the LR that recent scholarship applies to the medieval Cathar movement. Even if one can find various influences at work, essentially it represents a dualist and Gnostic Christianity.

Sources of Legitimization

Contemporary 'ancient wisdom' movements claim their legitimacy in esoteric circles according to three different models:

- a) There are those who claim a legitimacy of *origin*. They claim an 'apostolic succession' supposedly at work without interruption 'throughout history, starting from certain ancient initiates.
- b) Others claim a legitimacy given by signs or manifestations (levitation, clairvoyance, theurgy).
- c) Finally, there are those who seek their legitimization according to the purity of their doctrine, which can ensure contact with a spiritual current (or an eternal 'gnosis'), regarded as more important than any historical affiliation.

These are of course three ideal types, because many groups claim all three types of legitimacy (although one may remain dominant). One is struck here by the difference, within the same Rosicrucian family, between AMORC and the LR. For AMORC the legitimacy of origin is of capital importance. It is on the basis of a number of initiations received by its founder that AMORC claims to be the only authentic

13. Among Brenon's large production, see on this point Brenon 1996.

Rosicrucian organization. For other groups, including the *Fraternitas Rosicruciana Antiqua* (as evidenced by Krumm-Heller's novel *Rosa Cruz*)¹⁴ true legitimacy stems from supernatural 'signs'. For the LR, signs of this kind — spiritualism and magic in the usual sense of these words — have no legitimacy. Yet for the LR there is also a noble and acceptable sense in the word 'magic'. Legitimate 'magic' is the use of forces supporting a process of spiritual awakening of the soul that has already begun (as opposite to the self-aggrandizement of the ego consciousness and its 'powers'). It is only in this sense that one can define the LR as a 'magical movement'. The LR forcefully rejects all occult practices. They render humans, it claims, victims of an illusion that they themselves have created. Jan van Rijckenborgh noted the importance of sexual magic in the esoteric milieu, but he severely condemned such practices. He claimed that in the context of the esoteric anatomy he had outlined, they create the greatest dangers.¹⁵

As every esoteric group, the LR also claims a certain legitimacy of origin — particularly through Gadal's neo-Catharism — yet this element very rarely comes to the fore. In fact the most important element for the LR is the doctrine and the contact with the eternal gnosis as a spiritual current. The gnosis is a manifestation of the radiation field of Christ, a 'Universal Brotherhood' which is not limited to its human manifestations.

Claims of legitimacy of origin normally expose esoteric movements to the danger of empirical verifications by sceptics. AMORC's credentials were strongly criticized by R. Swinburne Clymer (1878-1966) of the *Fraternitas Rosae Crucis* (and vice versa).¹⁶ They are also criticized by contemporary authors such as Robert Vanloo.¹⁷ More recently a journalist and author, Christian Bernadac, attacked the LR with the typical language of the anti-cult movement in a work devoted to Nazi neo-Cathar Otto Rahn (1904-1939), *Montségur and the Grail*.¹⁸ The author, who does not seem to be very familiar with LR, apparently does not understand the difference between the varying legitimacy

14. A modern edition is Krumm-Heller 1984.

15. van Rijckenborgh 1980, 219-26.

16. See for example Clymer 1935.

17. Vanloo 1996.

18. Bernadac 1994.

claims. The legitimacy of the AMORC is promoted with a strong reference to its origin and 'apostolic succession'. The LR refers to Gadal, but it does not insist particularly on origin as its key legitimizing factor. This difference in the process of legitimization could explain certain controversies involving the AMORC and the LR. In the new 1996 edition of the presentation of the AMORC in questions and answers, the AMORC states that 'none of the (other) so-called Rosicrucian movements (...) can claim an authentic link with the true Tradition of the Rosy Cross. Today, it is the AMORC that is the inheritor of this Tradition and which perpetuates it'.¹⁹ One can see here a typical claim centred on the legitimacy of the origin. The AMORC even reminds its readers that 'it has nothing to do with a cult. It has never been mentioned as one in any of the official reports that have been published on cults'.²⁰ This is a rather inelegant allusion to the rather bizarre mention of the LR in the list of 'cults' of the 1996 French parliamentary report *Les sectes en France*,²¹ whose list has been widely criticized. The fact that this report gives extremely inaccurate information on the LR,²² while the AMORC is declared explicitly innocent of any 'cultic' connection,²³ raises some very delicate questions. Should we suppose that conflicts over different claims to Rosicrucian legitimacy will be decided in the future by parliamentary commissions?

The LR, the New Age and Post-Modernity

The LR is not part of the New Age movement. It considers all that is in fashion in this milieu to be typical of the dialectical field. Nevertheless, the LR has recruited members from the New Age environment and in some countries this has not happened by chance. For example, I had a chance to watch public lectures where the LR was clearly preaching to the New Agers. This happened in 1997 at the

19. *L'ordre de la Rose-Croix AMORC en questions* 1996, 98.

20. *Ibid.*, 17.

21. *Les sectes en France* 1996. For criticism by scholars and by the mainline churches see Introvigne and Melton 1996.

22. *Ibid.*, 24, 54.

23. *Ibid.*, 64.

Bodhi Tree bookstore in Hollywood, a true Mecca of the Californian New Age movement, and at the esoteric book fair in Tours, France. Many young LR members in Italy do not have any classical esoteric training. Rather, they became interested in esoteric ideas by reading New Age authors and journals (that they now criticize in view of their new identity). One could analyse here the hypotheses of Wouter Hanegraaff on the New Age as a form of esotericism in the mirror of secular thought. The path of some LR members seems to go backwards. They try to desecularize what currently passes for esotericism among the New Agers. LR pupils are looking for esoteric models regarded as more 'pure' and closer to a genuine ancient wisdom (Gnostic or Cathar). They are seeking rather distant models since they are clearly dissatisfied with the present-day offer of the New Age. They may also perceive New Age's current crisis as described by J. Gordon Melton.²⁴

Yet, the theories of Hanegraaff can be somewhat applied here. We may ask ourselves whether the personal itineraries of New Agers who join the LR are a transformation of the identity of the New Age rather than its rejection. For example, the LR affirms that present-day theories on reincarnation are false, yet that the core idea of reincarnation is correct. One could also ask oneself if a backward path is really possible and if the understanding of Gnosticism and Catharism today does not itself take place in Hanegraaff's 'mirror of secular thought'.

It may also be argued that the recent success of the LR is somewhat connected to postmodernity. It is of vital importance to distinguish between postmodernism and postmodernity. There is no society created on the basis of postmodernist theories, and sociologists of religion are quite right in general to affirm that the ideas of postmodernist theorists have hardly had any influence in the religious field (with some exceptions).²⁵ However, one can speak of postmodernity as a fact, and of a postmodern society as a contemporary society where there is a crisis of typically modern values and ideals, such as rationality and science. If this society of postmodernity exists (irrespective of postmodernist theories), it is normal that religious forms

24. See Melton 1998.

25. See Flanagan and Jupp 1996.

that are distant from modernity will flourish. Yet these forms will not necessarily follow the ideas of postmodernist theoreticians, and may in fact be far removed from them. This is the case, I believe, of the LR. It is a movement that prospers typically in the context of postmodernity, while its conception of truth and gnosis is to be found at the antipodes of the postmodernist theories. The LR is postmodern in the sense that it criticizes rationalism and modernity, yet does not promote a return to premodern values nor does it regard premodernity, as a whole, as a golden age. On the other hand, the LR is very much remote from postmodernist theories since it affirms its gnosis as an absolute and universal truth. In doing this the LR claims to offer a connection with an oppositional and persecuted brand of premodernity, Catharism. Hanegraaff argued that esotericism survived into the New Age only by somewhat accepting to be transformed and reshaped by secular thought. Although the LR is at times surprisingly faithful to Catharism as reconstructed by modern scholarship, it is unclear whether living according to an unadulterated Cathar worldview is really possible in the contemporary world. Perhaps — as Hanegraaff's esotericism in the New Age — the LR's brand of Catharism may only survive as Catharism in the mirror of secular thought.

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