

## SOURCES OF GURDJIEFF'S TEACHINGS<sup>1</sup>

From the beginning of Gurdjieff's teaching mission in the West, a number of questions have fuelled an ongoing debate about the source of his teachings and practices. Where did he learn his powerful system of psychological and cosmological ideas? What particular spiritual teachings form the foundation of his work? Which teachers inspired and influenced his development?

When asked these questions directly, Gurdjieff seemed reluctant to provide any information of substance, typically answering evasively or in generalities. On one occasion when esotericist Boris Mouravieff asked him about the source of his teaching, he replied: "Maybe I stole it." (1)

Gurdjieff sometimes spoke to his students of his search for esoteric knowledge and teachings and his eventual discovery of "elements of a forgotten knowledge of being that reconciled the great traditional beliefs. He called it 'ancient science' but did not identify its origin, those who discovered and preserved it." (2) In an interview with scholar Denis Saurat in 1923 he provided some general indications of this search:

Thirty years ago, twelve of us spent many years in Central Asia, and we reconstructed the Doctrine; by oral traditions, the study of ancient costumes, popular songs and even certain books. The Doctrine has always existed, but the tradition has often been interrupted. In antiquity some groups and castes knew it, but it was incomplete. (3)

According to Gurdjieff, a comprehensive teaching of human spiritual development existed in ancient times but was later divided into specializations: "In India there was 'philosophy,' in Egypt 'theory,' and in present-day Persia, Mesopotamia, and Turkestan – 'practice'." (4) He also spoke of four principal lines of esoteric teaching – Egyptian, Hebraic, Persian and Hindu, and two Western mixtures of these lines, theosophy and occultism. The latter two lines "bear in themselves grains of truth, but neither of them possess full knowledge and therefore attempts to bring them to practical realization give only negative results." (5)

In his writings and talks to his pupils, Gurdjieff gave hints of possible sources of his teaching:

- the Sarmoung Brotherhood (*Meetings with Remarkable Men*)
- esoteric Christianity (*In Search of the Miraculous*)
- the Judaeo-Christian Brotherhood of the Essenes (*Beelzebub's Tales*)
- a Dervish monastery in Central Asia (*Herald of Coming Good*)
- the esoteric core of Islam in Bokhara (*Meetings with Remarkable Men*)
- the non-denominational World Brotherhood (*Meetings with Remarkable Men*)

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Some believe that the source of Gurdjieff's teaching lies in prehistoric Egypt in the form of an 'esoteric Christianity' that predates Jesus Christ. William Patterson postulates that Gurdjieff discovered this ancient esoteric teaching in his travels to Egypt and Ethiopia but recognized that certain elements of a comprehensive spiritual teaching were missing. He made subsequent journeys to Central Asia, northern Siberia and other regions to unify and reformulate the fragments of the original teaching into a Fourth Way teaching suitable for modern times. (6)

Gurdjieff emphasized that the knowledge he was imparting in his Fourth Way teachings was unlike any other system of spiritual ideas previously encountered in the West: "The teaching whose theory is here being set out is completely self-supporting and independent of other lines and it has been completely unknown to the present time." (7)

Four primary hypotheses have emerged concerning the origin of Gurdjieff's teaching:

- Gurdjieff constructed the System himself, synthesizing his own vision from the diverse schools of thought and ideas he absorbed during his research and travels.
- Gurdjieff drew primarily from one particular traditional spiritual teaching and modified the terminology so that it appeared to be his own.
- Gurdjieff combined his own findings with that of other specialists and spiritual seekers to produce a coherent composite body of teaching.
- Gurdjieff discovered an ancient school of esoteric wisdom, whose teachers sent him on a mission to the West to articulate their teachings in a language suitable for the modern world.

The catalogue of suspected influences on and sources for Gurdjieff's work is broad and impressive: Eastern Orthodox Christianity, the teachings of the Essenes, Gnosticism, Sufism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Pythagorean teachings, Theosophy, Rosicrucian teachings, shamanistic traditions of Asia and elsewhere, Jewish mystical teaching and the Kabbalah, Zoroastrianism, Neo-Platonism and Stoic teachings.

Of those who argue that Gurdjieff's System is a synthesis of traditions (8), Boris Mouravieff distinguishes three strains in the Work: fragments of Esoteric Christianity, certain Islamic traditions, and Gurdjieff's own ideas. Professor Yannis Toussulis proposes that Gurdjieff's System is a "synthesis of various elements of Western, Near Eastern, and Far Eastern traditions (9), while professor Franklin D. Lewis suggests that it is "an amalgam of esoteric Christian and Sufi beliefs. (10) Biographer James Webb identifies two distinct aspects: "a definitely Oriental part, based largely on Buddhist thought with an admixture of Sufi lore; and a definitely Western part, founded on European occultism as derived from the Gnostics, Neo-Platonists, and Rosicrucians." (11)

John G. Bennett found traces of these and many other traditions in Gurdjieff's System, but also identified many elements of the System which do not appear to be associated with any particular tradition (12):

Anyone who takes the trouble to examine his teaching and methods, can assign nearly every fragment to some known tradition. We can say that this theme came from the Greek Orthodox tradition, that theme came from an Assyrian or Babylonian tradition, another was clearly Muslim and connected with Sufism and even with this or that particular Sufi sect. One can say of others that they must have come from one or other of the branches of Buddhism. Again, there are indications that he took much from what is called the Western occult tradition, the Platonic and Rosicrucian tradition. But when one examines still more closely, we find that there is something that cannot be assigned to any known traditions. There are certain very important features of which one cannot find any trace in literature. (13)

Professor Jacob Needleman concurs, noting that "Gurdjieff not only restated the ancient, perennial teachings in a language adapted to the modern mind, but also brought to these ancient principles something of such colossal originality that those who followed him detected in his teaching the signs of what in Western terminology may be designated a new revelation." (14) Needleman also maintains that it is unlikely we will ever know with certainty the source of Gurdjieff's teachings. And, biographer James Webb believes that any attempt to attribute them to any one particular religious tradition would be "futile." The issue is further complicated by the fact that the world's spiritual traditions have cross-fertilized over the centuries so that they share many common elements.

Biographers, scholars and students of Gurdjieff who have attempted to discern the origin and sources of his teachings have been faced with numerous challenges, forcing them to adopt a multitude of approaches:

Given the paucity of directly-confirmable references about Gurdjieff's early life, except those which he provides in *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, biographers have been forced to do some detective work to fill in the gaps. Many have attempted to discern the origins by going back to his writing, to his music, to the records of his oral talks, to the notes and books about him by his early students and then the large corpus of secondary works that have been written since his death in 1949 . . . Some responses have taken what might now be described as a more orthodox approach to his work, asserting that Gurdjieff and the Fourth Way teaching that he taught was unique, and that either the sources cannot be found, or that it is not important to discover them. Some have suggested that it is now impossible to find the sources of his teaching. Other authors have sought the source of his teachings by traveling back to the places that Gurdjieff mentioned in his writings. Still others have constructed a theory of origins, drawing on support from different traditions, and from their own personal experience. (15)

Scholars and students of Gurdjieff have provisionally identified four seminal influences on his System: Christianity, Sufism, Eastern religions like Buddhism and Hinduism, and Western occult tradition. A careful examination of the tenets and practices of each of these spiritual traditions reveals many significant points of similarity with the teachings of Gurdjieff.

## **Christianity**

Over the course of Gurdjieff's life, Christianity was an important influence. As a boy growing up in Armenia Gurdjieff had an early exposure to Christianity, as his primary education was entrusted to teachers at Kars Cathedral, where he was baptized a Christian. As an adult, during his extensive search for ancient knowledge, Gurdjieff travelled to Mount Athos to study Christian mysticism, to Jerusalem in search of the mystery of the Essene brotherhood and to Abyssinia (Ethiopia) to explore the Coptic roots of ancient Christianity. Gurdjieff believed that the Coptic Church possessed a special knowledge of the origins of Christianity that had been lost by both Catholic and Orthodox Christianity. Significantly, at his death in 1949, it was Gurdjieff's wish that a high requiem mass be sung in the Alexandre Nevski Cathedral in Paris, that services be conducted by a Russian priest, and that he should be buried at the Russian Orthodox cemetery in Avon.

According to Boris Mouravieff, Gurdjieff's System can be traced historically from Egypt, Greece and Central Asia to the Eastern Orthodox Church. Gurdjieff, the son of a Greek father and an Armenian mother, was exposed as a youth to both the Greek and Armenian Christian Churches. John G. Bennett suggests that Gurdjieff's lifelong contact with the Eastern Orthodox Church – first through his parents and later in adulthood through contact with Orthodox monks – fostered a strong sense of identification with that tradition which lasted until he died. Bennett also reported that some of the exercises that Gurdjieff taught to his pupils were drawn from the Eastern Orthodox tradition.

Christian themes abound in Gurdjieff's System. In a conversation with Mouravieff in 1924, Gurdjieff stated that Christianity was the "ABC" of his teaching. (16) And in the prospectus of the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man at the Prieuré, the stated aim was to help pupils "to be able to be a Christian." As well, St. George the Victor was chosen by Gurdjieff as the patron saint of the Institute.

The first sentence in *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* ends with the Christian prayer, "In the name of the Father and of the Son and in the name of the Holy Ghost. Amen." There are numerous references in the book to Biblical themes and Christian doctrines, including the hierarchy of angels and archangels and the Biblical sequence of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Revelation. Jesus Christ is venerated as a 'Divine Teacher,' 'Sacred Individual' and 'Messenger from our Endlessness,' bringing a great message of hope and redemption for humanity.

Gurdjieff's students recognized many similarities between Gurdjieff's teachings and Christian doctrine. (17) The Gospels frequently refer to the idea of sleep and the necessity for watchfulness. Gurdjieff's process of achieving freedom from the tyranny of the personality is very closely related to the Christian notion of the importance of man being "born again" into a higher state after the death of one's former self. In collaboration with Thomas de Hartmann, Gurdjieff composed musical pieces with Christian themes or titles, such as "Hymn for Easter Thursday," "The Story of the Resurrection of Christ" and "Hymn for Christmas Day." In the course of teaching, Gurdjieff and many of his senior pupils made extensive use of texts, parables and proverbs from the Gospels. (18)

A number of parallels between Gurdjieff's ideas and Eastern Orthodox devotional practices have been discovered in the texts of Bishop Theophan the Recluse. Scholar Robin Amis argues that Theophan's 19th century writings use "a detailed terminology that makes it incontestable that many of the special terms of the System were fully developed many decades before the births of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky." (19) Amis points to concepts and practices such as 'magnetic center,' 'self-remembering' and 'permanent center of gravity,' which Eastern Orthodox teachings and Gurdjieff's System share in common. Mouravieff also suggests that many of Gurdjieff's aphorisms may have originated from ancient esoteric texts preserved by the Eastern Orthodox Church.

William Patterson, in his essay "Who is Mr. Gurdjieff," disputes the notion that Eastern Orthodox Christianity was the primary source of Gurdjieff's teaching:

As there has been a concerted attempt to cast The Fourth Way as simply a derivative of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, let's examine this contention more closely. Proponents of this view point to the use of attention in the *Philokalia*, the writings of the early church fathers. But attention is the basis of spiritual work of all traditions; it is the "gas" without which no engine runs. After Ouspensky left Gurdjieff he devoted much time to studying the New Testament and the writings of St. Simeon and others . . . One can easily argue that Ouspensky, in trying to find the origin of The Fourth Way in the Eastern Church, was unconsciously trying to justify his break with Gurdjieff. Whatever the case, The Fourth Way is a way in ordinary life. It is not the monastic way of Mt. Athos. The Fourth Way is not a withdrawal from life. Orthodox proponents also point to when Gurdjieff was asked about the origin of the teaching and he replied that "if you like, this is esoteric Christianity." *If you like . . .* that is, if you must have a familiar category (Russia at that time was heavily Christianized.) (20)

Gurdjieff had a theory about the origins of the teachings and practices of the Christian Church. He believed that over time the original teachings of Jesus Christ were badly distorted in their transmission by the Christian Church, but that a small group of initiates called the 'Brotherhood of the Essenes' (21) were secretly able to preserve them in their original form and subsequently transmit them to successive generations.

Gurdjieff believed that the Essenes initiated Jesus and prepared him for his role as a teacher, and that the esoteric knowledge he received was essential to all that Jesus became and achieved while on earth. Some believe that the teachings of the Essenes were secretly transmitted to the early Gnostics. The Gnostics flourished throughout the eastern Mediterranean region in the first two centuries after the birth of Christ. The Gnostic teachings were more mystical and occult than the more theological doctrine of traditional Christians and their interpretations of the Scriptures more esoteric.

Two of Gurdjieff's students, C. S. Nott and Margaret Anderson, claimed to have traced the roots of Gurdjieff's teachings to the Gnostics. They suggest that Gurdjieff's System may have its origin in early Christianity, but that it better reflects the esoteric teachings of Jesus than the official Christian doctrine. When questioned by one of his Russian pupils about the relationship between his teachings and Christianity, Gurdjieff responded: "It would be necessary to talk a great deal and to talk for a long time in order to make clear what you understand by this term. But for the benefit of those who know already, I will say that, if you like, *this is esoteric Christianity.*" (22)

Fourth Way author William Patterson offers an interpretation of Gurdjieff's words: "This, however, does not mean that the Fourth Way *is* esoteric Christianity. Nor does it mean that contemporary Christianity is the basis, the root, of the Fourth Way. The teaching is linked with Christianity, but in the sense that the teaching predated the origin of Christianity as we historically know it." (23) Gurdjieff's reference to esoteric Christianity as the source of his teachings may also be based on the fact that his students at this time were primarily Christian, either practising or having been raised as Christians. Patterson believes that Gurdjieff, in his search for esoteric knowledge, found evidence that Egypt held the key to the origin of the Fourth Way:

After being initiated four times into ancient Egyptian Mysteries and re-discovering the essential principles and ideas, Gurdjieff, realizing that over time segments of the teaching had migrated northward, made a second journey travelling to Persia, the Hindu Kush, and Tibet reassembling the elements he found and reformulating the teaching for modern times. He called the teaching The Fourth Way to distinguish it from the three classical ways of body, heart and mind, as it works on all three at once . . . It is "completely unknown" because its origin is prehistoric – predating the ancient Egyptian religion, Judaism, Zoroaster, the Avesta and the Hindu Rig Veda. So, in sum, Gurdjieff is, and is not, a Christian. The Fourth Way teaching is, and is not, Christian. It depends on what we know about Christianity, our definition of it. For Gurdjieff, there are two forms of Christianity, its original form and its contemporary form. The Fourth Way, for Gurdjieff, is esoteric Christianity in its highest form. That is, if it is so recognized and practiced. (24)

Patterson's belief that Gurdjieff's System predates Christianity's Egyptian-Judaic heritage is consistent with Gurdjieff's teaching that the Christian Church, in its earliest and purest form, was a school of esoteric wisdom. Gurdjieff claimed that the basic principles

of true Christian doctrine originated thousands of years before the birth of Jesus in ancient Egypt (25). Only certain aspects of the doctrine survived to historical times, having been preserved and transmitted in secret over millennia.

Gurdjieff's theory about the origins of Christianity runs contrary to the established opinions of most scholars of religion, but is accepted as historically valid by certain esoteric schools. Gurdjieff regarded the deviation by the Christian Church from the original teachings of Christ as a regrettable development in the history of the religion, which he appeared to believe was a superior doctrine:

If only the teaching of the Divine Jesus Christ were carried out in full conformity with its original, then the religion . . . founded on it would not only be the best of all existing religions, but even of all religions which may arise and exist in the future. (26)

### Sufism

Gurdjieff was born and raised in a region of the world steeped in Islamic traditions and teachings. Although Gurdjieff made pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina during his travels, he was not attracted to orthodox Islam. In *Beelzebub's Tales* he wrote that Islam, like most organized religions, had deteriorated from its original impulse and no longer represented the heart of the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed, of whom he spoke in the highest terms as "the Sacred Individual Saint Mohammed." Gurdjieff believed that the esoteric teachings of Islam were "in Bokhara, where from the beginning the secret knowledge of Islam has been concentrated, this place having become its very centre and source." (27) John G. Bennett believed that Bokhara was associated with the Naqshbandi Sufis who had preserved the inner teachings of Islam in their original form.

There is no doubt that Gurdjieff was strongly influenced by Sufism. In his writings, he made frequent reference to specific dervish orders and to Sufi spiritual ideas and practices. Although it has been difficult to verify the facts surrounding Gurdjieff's early research expeditions, scholar Anna Challenger is convinced that an inquiry into Sufism figured prominently during this period:

Despite the measures he took to conceal information regarding his past, Gurdjieff's debt to Sufism is evident. When he spoke of places he had been and people with whom he had studied, it was often in the context of stories that contained obvious exaggeration and contradiction, most likely with the purpose – in accord with Sufi tradition – of discouraging identification, of shifting focus from himself to his teaching. But given all the obscurity surrounding his searching years, Gurdjieff's connection with Sufism is undeniable. (28)

In a lecture to his students at the Prieuré in 1923, Gurdjieff described Sufism as a synthesis of the inner meaning of all religions. And in *Beelzebub's Tales*, he states that

Sufi dervishes have preserved the original, authentic teaching of Mohammed – the inner esoteric teachings of Islam. John G. Bennett, then a student at the Priuré, reported that “in all Gurdjieff’s lectures at the time, the Sufi origin of his teachings was unmistakable for anyone who had studied both.” (29)

In *The Teachers of Gurdjieff*, Rafael Lefort maintains that Gurdjieff studied under a succession of Sufi teachers, and from them received important training in the arts of carpet-weaving, calligraphy, carpentry, music and dancing. Lefort also posits that classical Sufi texts studied by Gurdjieff, like *The Walled Garden of Truth* by Hakim Sanai, became the basis for his own writings.

Gurdjieff wrote that during his travels he had access to Sufi schools throughout the East and spent two years at a dervish monastery in Central Asia. John G. Bennett and others believe that the methods and exercises that Gurdjieff learned at these schools were later employed during his teaching mission in the West. There is considerable evidence to support this hypothesis:

- The close teacher-student relationship encouraged by Gurdjieff, in which spiritual energy or *baraka* (30) is transferred from teacher to student, is an important feature of Sufi teaching.
- Gurdjieff’s role-playing and unconventional behaviour is much like the Sufi practice of the ‘Path of Blame.’ (31)
- The practice of ‘self-remembering’ and the use of breathing techniques in conjunction with mental exercises are common Sufi exercises.
- Gurdjieff’s teaching of the ‘chief feature’ – the central axis of the false personality – is resonant with the Naqshbandi Sufi concept of a ‘defective feature’ (*Khassiyat i-naqs*)
- Gurdjieff’s conceptualization of the seven levels of being – physical, emotional, intellectual, balanced, unified, conscious and perfected – is very similar to the Sufi sevenfold system of ‘stations’ or *maqamat*.
- One of Gurdjieff’s most famous exercises, the ‘Stop Exercise,’ is believed to have originated with the Mevlevi dervishes. (32)
- Gurdjieff taught the importance of service and sacrifice, which he called ‘conscious labour and intentional suffering,’ two ideas central to the Sufi teaching of disciplining the lower self or *nafs*.
- Group work is an essential feature of both Sufism and the Gurdjieff Work.



- Gurdjieff's students engaged in a combination of craft work, manual labour, gardening, construction, cleaning and animal husbandry, much like the work tasks of Sufi schools. Gurdjieff's assignment of kitchen duties to his pupils is similar to the practices of certain dervish orders where each member must serve the community beginning with work in the kitchen. (33)
- The ritual feasts, which were a signature of Gurdjieff's practical teachings, are common in Sufi communities throughout the East. And, according to John G. Bennett, Gurdjieff's ritual 'Toast of the Idiots' can be traced to ancient Sufi customs from Central Asia.
- At the Prieuré in France, Gurdjieff constructed a study hall that was decorated after the fashion of a Sufi *tekke* or meeting place.
- Many of the musical pieces composed by Gurdjieff and Thomas de Hartmann have Sufi titles, such as "Sayyid Song and Dance" and "Sacred Reading from the Koran." Gurdjieff incorporated a Persian dervish song and various dervish dances in his ballet *The Struggle of the Magicians*. (34)
- Many of the sacred gymnastics, dances and Movements that Gurdjieff taught his students were clearly of Sufi origin. There is a striking similarity between some of Gurdjieff's movements and dervish rituals, movements from the Moslem prayer and the whirling or turning dances of the Mevlevi Sufis. (35)
- Gurdjieff's use of costumes for special ceremonies and public performances of the movements reflect traditional dervish practices.
- There is evidence that the name of the Sarmoung monastery may have a Sufi derivation. (36)
- The style and content of Gurdjieff's writings are reminiscent of traditional Eastern literature, especially Sufi teaching stories. (37)

It is in his writings where the influence of Sufism on Gurdjieff is arguably the most evident. In *Beelzebub's Tales* and *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (38), Gurdjieff features traditional Sufi teaching stories such as "The Transcaucasian Kurd and the Red Peppers" and dervish characters like Bogga-Eddin and Hadji-Asvatz-Troov. John G. Bennett proposes that the character Bogga-Eddin may be a concealed reference to the famous Sufi teacher Bahauddin Naqshband. The central character in *Beelzebub's Tales* is the archetypal 'Beelzebub' (39) whose grandson Hasein is similar in name to Hassan and Hussein, the grandsons of Mohammed. And, the name of another character in *Beelzebub's Tales*, Ashiata Shiemash, may have a Sufi derivation. (40)

*Beelzebub's Tales* possesses a non-linear multi-dimensional structure with an emphasis on humour, imagination and inversion of logic, features which echo the storytelling structure of many Sufi teaching tales:

Akin to the structure of much Sufi literature, including the Koran, the format of *Beelzebub's Tales* is not linear; its stories are scattered throughout the whole of the work, rather than relayed in single episodes . . . Rather than building up in a concentric pattern, Beelzebub's tales meander in and out of one another, a thread being dropped at one point, picked up at another, dropped again, and resumed pages or chapters later. This non-linear narrative approach obviously demands more of the reader, requiring more attention and effort than would a straightforward narrative, and reminding us of another dimension that Gurdjieff's tales, the Koran, and much Islamic literature have in common – that they are offered in the tradition of oral literature, intended for recitation in public and in groups. (41)

One of the most interesting references in Gurdjieff's writings is to Mullah Nasr Eddin (or Mulla Nasrudin), a traditional Middle Eastern teaching figure. Nasrudin plays the role of the 'wise fool' or 'master of paradox' in many Sufi tales, and his stories contain profound spiritual teachings concealed beneath a lighthearted surface. (42) Gurdjieff's use of Nasrudin as a teaching figure parallels his appearance in Sufi teaching stories. In *Beelzebub's Tales* Nasrudin's role is that of insightful observer of human behaviour and the embodiment of practical counsel. (43)

John G. Bennett believed that Gurdjieff's System was strongly influenced by one particular branch of Sufism, the Naqshbandi Sufis. (44) Both the Naqshbandi Sufis and Gurdjieff refer to their studies as 'the Fourth Way,' and have many similar doctrines and techniques, including using the normal conditions of everyday life as a means of spiritual growth and aspiring to a balanced harmonious development.

Contemporary Sufi teachers such as Murat Yagan and Idries Shah (45) have also identified Sufism as the source of Gurdjieff's teachings. Yagan believes that Gurdjieff made contact with a perennial source of esoteric wisdom that has existed in the Caucasus Mountains for some twenty-six thousand years. He claims that this source transmitted esoteric teachings to the Khwajagan or Masters of Wisdom (46) who later inspired the Fourth Way teachings of the Naqshbandi Sufis: "Much of what developed into the northern tradition of Sufism, including the Fourth Way teachings inspired by Gurdjieff, is based upon the teachings of the Khwajagan." (47) Idries Shah concurs with this position:

G.I. Gurdjieff left abundant clues to the Sufic origin of virtually every point in his 'system'; though it obviously belongs more specifically to the Khwajagan (Naqshbandi) form of the dervish teaching. In addition to the practices of 'the work,' such books as Gurdjieff's *Beelzebub* and *Meetings with Remarkable Men* abound with references, often semi-covert ones, to the Sufi system. (48)

Gurdjieff and the Naqshbandi share another common feature: the forms in which they project their teachings are mutable – changing, appearing and disappearing as needed with the dictates of time and place. John G. Bennett and Anna Challenger have pointed out that Gurdjieff and the Naqshbandi Sufis both use shocks and surprises as techniques to awaken their students, and both considered the everyday suffering and challenges of human relationships to be integral to man’s spiritual evolution.

John G. Bennett’s research suggests that the Naqshbandi Sufis were connected with an ‘Inner Circle of Humanity’ responsible for the evolutionary development of the human race. Both Bennett and Murat Yagan believe that the Naqshbandi Sufis are the heirs to one of the esoteric schools directed by the ‘Inner Circle’ known as the Khwajagan or Masters of Wisdom, which flourished in Central Asia in the period 950-1450 CE. Some scholars believe that Gurdjieff was accepted as a student of this school and was privy to their secret teachings. (49)

Author Max Gorman suggests that Gurdjieff contacted a body of ‘inner Sufis’ associated with the Khwajagan and located at one of their spiritual centres in the Hindu Kush:

Gurdjieff received his esoteric education from a teacher or teachers belonging to a body of people whom we can call the Sarmouni Sufis. Reliable information has also emerged in the course of the last thirty years that this community is identical with the tradition called the Khwajagan or Order of the Masters, and the inner Naqshbandi Order, also known as the Designers. It would seem, therefore, that Gurdjieff was an emissary of these People, with a particular role to perform. The question is – *what* was that role? There can be no doubt that Gurdjieff was a genuine teacher sent out to perform a certain task by the Inner Circle of Humanity of which he sometimes spoke, and whose agent he was, at least from 1914 when he formed his first group in Moscow to when he died in 1949 in Paris. (50)

That Gurdjieff made contact with this particular esoteric school has never been established conclusively. Bennett, for one, was not convinced that the ‘Inner Circle’ was anything more than an allegory, and that it was, in any event, not exclusively Islamic. Regardless, the concept of an ‘Inner Circle of Humanity’ is central in both Sufi tradition and in Gurdjieff’s Fourth Way teachings.

There are dissenting voices to the proposition that Sufism is the source (or principal source) of Gurdjieff’s teachings. Among the most vociferous is William Patterson: “It can be clearly and unequivocally stated: Gurdjieff was not a Sufi but a Christian, who, like the teaching that he brought, is centered in a ‘Christianity *before* Christ’.” (51) He makes his argument in his essay “What is the Origin of the Teaching?”:

Yes, there are references to Sufis in Gurdjieff’s writings, and possibly he was initiated into one or another of their orders. But the Christianity of

which he speaks – and out of which he teaches – *predates* Sufism, contemporary Christianity and Judaism by many thousands of years. In his search, yes, he did visit Mecca, but in disguise, because he was not Muslim. There are those who would divide Sufism from its Islamic base, but as William C. Chittick, a noted scholar of Islam and Sufism, shows in his *Faith and Practice of Islam*, one can't be a true Sufi and *not* be a Muslim. If a Sufi, then Gurdjieff must have kept the Five Pillars of the Islamic faithful. Did he? Of course not. Moreover, as we see in *All and Everything*, he certainly did not accept Muhammad as God's only prophet. Are some of the songs and dances he taught Sufic in origin? Yes. But this doesn't make The Fourth Way a Sufi teaching. (52)

### **Buddhism and Hinduism**

During the course of Gurdjieff's travels, he investigated the major religions of the East, including Buddhism and Hinduism. Around the turn of the 20th century Gurdjieff spent considerable time in Tibet, visiting and studying in monasteries where he would have encountered many Tibetan Buddhist teachings and practices.

Some of Gurdjieff's followers believed that he incorporated facets of Buddhism into his teaching. For the public demonstrations of sacred dances and Movements given in Paris and New York in 1924, Gurdjieff provided program notes that indicated the source of some of the dances and rituals as being from Tibetan monasteries. Biographer James Webb believed that the general thrust of Gurdjieff's teachings are similar to the Buddhist doctrine contained in esoteric texts such as the *Abhidamma*, though not nearly as sophisticated or complex. Certain specific ideas appear to have been borrowed by Gurdjieff from esoteric Pali texts. (53)

Gurdjieff's Fourth Way principle of a balanced and harmonious spiritual development echoes the Buddhist concept of the Middle Way. A notion similar to Gurdjieff's idea of 'higher bodies' attained through spiritual practices is found in both the Buddhist and Tantric teachings of India and Tibet. Perhaps the strongest correspondence is the similarity between Gurdjieff's method of self-observation and many forms of Buddhist meditation, such as the practice of 'bare attention,' where the practitioner, observing a natural succession of fleeting thoughts, sensations and emotions, develops an awareness that identity is not fixed but rather changing and multi-faceted.

Gurdjieff's use of shock, confrontation and role-playing bear a strong resemblance to the 'crazy wisdom' behaviour of certain Zen and Tibetan Buddhist teachers, as do a number of other routines and practices at Gurdjieff's Institute at the Priuré:

D.T. Suzuki's description of an irate Master of 'primitive' Zen equally well describes the inconsistent and combative character of Gurdjieff at Fontainebleau. In the Zen monastery, physical labor is considered important, a particular status is ascribed to those performing kitchen service, and there is constant sutra-reading, which does not require that the listeners grasp intellectually what they hear. Most interesting of all, the

parallels between the routine of the Prieuré and the practice of the Zendo is the ritual of the bath . . . and several Zen masters have made symbolic use of the bath in their teaching. (54)

During his journeys to the East, Gurdjieff learned a great deal about the traditional spiritual teachings of India, which appeared to have influenced his own teachings. (55) Gurdjieff was familiar with yoga postures and breathing techniques and taught his students similar exercises. Gurdjieff's concept of the seven centres of a human being appears similar to the yoga and tantric concept of the seven 'chakras.' A number of important ideas articulated by Gurdjieff are found in the Hindu *Upanishads*, including the hierarchical nature of materiality in the universe and the analogy of the 'owner, driver, horse and carriage' to the complete human being.

Many of Gurdjieff's students have also noted the close relationship between his teaching of the 'Law of Three' and the idea of the three *gunas* found in Hindu philosophy, especially *Sankhya*, though some consider Gurdjieff's exposition of the Law of Three to be more sophisticated and complete.

Buddhist and Hindu teachings penetrated much of the Asian continent and influenced the thinking of many medieval philosophers and spiritual teachers. Gurdjieff probably assimilated many Buddhist and Hindu ideas and practices in the course of his search for esoteric knowledge. It is likely he modified and adapted them for presentation to a modern Western audience.

### **Western Occult Tradition**

The roots of the Western occult tradition have been traced to the esoteric teachings of ancient Egypt, the philosophical schools of Pythagoras and Plato, and the Gnostic teachings of early Christianity. In medieval Europe, many of the ideas emanating from these original sources were synthesized and recast in the magical-occult language of the Rosicrucians and Freemasons.

The Western occult tradition played a prominent role in metaphysical circles in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Gurdjieff was clearly familiar with these teachings, especially Theosophy and the writings of Madame H.B. Blavatsky (*Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*). According to professor Yannis Toussulis, a number of Theosophical influences are at play in *Meetings with Remarkable Men* and elements of Theosophical concepts can be found in Gurdjieff's psychological teachings. But Gurdjieff had reservations about the usefulness of much of the occult teachings and practices of the time:

There are two lines known in Europe, namely *theosophy* and so-called *Western occultism*, which have resulted from a mixture of the fundamental lines [Hebraic, Egyptian, Persian, Hindu]. Both lines bear in themselves grains of truth, but neither of them possess full knowledge and therefore

attempts to bring them to a practical realization give only negative results.  
(56)

Despite his misgivings, Gurdjieff employed the theosophical terms ‘astral body,’ ‘mental body’ and ‘causal body’ in his teachings. He viewed the use of occult language as appropriate to make certain ideas more accessible for his students.

Gurdjieff’s use of occult terminology applied primarily to his cosmological teachings, which he called “the laws of world creation and world maintenance.” Attempts have been made by various researchers to identify the sources of his cosmological ideas. James Webb suggested that the writings of European philosophers of the Late Renaissance and Middle Ages, such as Francesco Giorgi and Robert Fludd, exerted a significant influence. John G. Bennett found traces of Chaldean, Zoroastrian and esoteric Christian teachings in some aspects of Gurdjieff’s cosmology and argues that Gurdjieff’s ‘Table of Hydrogens’ was derived from Neoplatonic and Gnostic sources. Bennett ultimately concludes that Gurdjieff synthesized his cosmology from a number of sources.

Number symbolism or ‘mystical mathematics’ was closely connected to three primary sources of Western occult tradition: Platonic, Neo-Platonic and Gnostic teachings. Much of Gurdjieff’s cosmology is based on the symbolism of numbers and on this basis certain parallels with Western occult teachings can be identified:

- The ‘Law of Three,’ the concept that three forces are present in the formation of any given phenomenon, is a basic occult precept.
- Gurdjieff’s terms ‘carbon,’ ‘oxygen,’ nitrogen’ and ‘hydrogen’ can be equated with the four elements of earth, air, fire and water.
- The octave principle of Gurdjieff’s ‘Law of Seven’ and ‘Ray of Creation’ is almost identical to the esoteric ideas of Pythagoras.
- Gurdjieff’s idea of a hierarchy of substances ranging from the finest (Divine) to the coarsest (Matter) as embodied in his ‘Table of Hydrogens’ is similar to Plato’s concept of the ‘Great Chain of Being’ in the *Timaeus*.
- Gurdjieff expressed the stages of human spiritual development in terms of the number progression 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 (dyad, triad, quaternity, pentad and hexad), similar to the corresponding numerical and diagrammatic representations used in Western occultism.

Gurdjieff’s theories concerning vibrations and musical octaves may also have been derived from Pythagorean sources. In *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, Gurdjieff indicated that he had conducted research into the effects of music and sound vibrations on human psychology and physiology, and it is apparent that he was familiar with the principles of Pythagorean harmony. Webb believes that Pythagorean principles were also the

source of Gurdjieff's ideas about objective art, as both were based on common mathematical principles of proportion, which also informed Gurdjieff's numerology. Further, Gurdjieff's use of 'objective music' for healing of emotional and physical ailments is distinctly Pythagorean.

However, there are clear differences between Gurdjieff's presentation of the Law of Octaves and the traditional articulation of this principle in Western occult teachings. John G. Bennett asserts that Gurdjieff deviated from these teachings in his emphasis on an appreciation of the significance of the intervals between certain notes of the octave.

Gurdjieff placed great importance on the enneagram, which he claimed symbolized his cosmological teachings by integrating the Law of Three and Law of Seven. Bennett was unable to find any reference to the enneagram symbol in any Western occult tradition.

Gurdjieff claimed that the enneagram was exclusive to his teaching: "This symbol cannot be met anywhere in the study of 'occultism,' either in books or in oral transmission." (57) James Webb disputes this statement and asserts that representations of the enneagram in various forms are to be found in European occult literature and drawings dating from the 17th century, including an illustration in *Arithmologia*, a work by the Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher published in 1655. Other sources have also indicated that the enneagram was known in medieval times. (58)

Webb believes that the enneagram is also closely linked to another esoteric diagram, the Kabbalistic 'Tree of Life.' The Tree of Life displays the descent of Divinity from the Godhead to Earth, which some have likened to Gurdjieff's 'Ray of Creation.' However, Webb argues that the Tree of Life is a much more complex and complete hieroglyph than either the enneagram or the Ray of Creation. Scholars like Z'ev ben Shimon Halevi have attempted, with limited success, to correlate Gurdjieff's use of the terms 'triad,' 'octave' and 'interval' with the Kabbalistic interpretation of the Tree of Life. Although Webb believes that there is a link between the Tree of Life and the enneagram, he questions the degree of correspondence.

These scholarly disagreements highlight the difficulty of establishing with any degree of certainty the connection between Gurdjieff's cosmological ideas and Western occult traditions.

### Commentary

P.D. Ouspensky was once questioned whether he had ever attempted to find out the source of Gurdjieff's teachings:

"Did you ever ask Gurdjieff about the origins of the System?"

"We all asked him about 10 times a day, and every time the answer was different."

“Did you ask Gurdjieff why he always gave different answers?”

“Yes.”

“What did he say?”

“He said he never gave different answers.” (59)

Gurdjieff’s seemingly flippant response may conceal a revealing truth: the system of knowledge that he transmitted to his students contains elements from virtually all of the world’s spiritual traditions: “Echoes, resemblances, and correspondences with things in Gurdjieff’s teaching can be found in all the traditions, but this does not mean that he simply appropriated convenient aspects.” (60) Although the evidence suggests that esoteric Christianity and Sufism inspired many of the ideas in Gurdjieff’s teachings, other religious traditions also clearly played significant roles in the development of his system. (61)

In order to understand the origin of Gurdjieff’s teachings it is helpful to distinguish between two levels of traditional religion: the exoteric and the esoteric. In a talk to his students Gurdjieff clarified the distinction between the exoteric or outer component of a spiritual teaching and the essential esoteric or inner dynamic:

This difference [in religions] is only apparent . . . and this contradiction arises from several factors. People who judge a religion in this way have not penetrated the essence of the teaching, and their judgments are bound to be superficial. Religions are actually like mathematics: it is the elementary part, the most exoteric, that is offered to the masses, and this elementary part differs according to the religion. It is because a Messiah or Messenger from Above appears among people who differ in language, philosophical outlook, character, fundamental mentality, and many other temporal aspects, that he has to adapt to the times and choose an appropriate way to accomplish his task. (62)

A study of the inner teachings of the world’s great religions reveals that the closer one comes to the core of each doctrine – the esoteric heart – the more that one religion begins to resemble the other. In Gurdjieff’s apt analogy, “the ways that lead to the cognition of unity approach it like the radii of a circle moving towards the center; the closer they come to the center, the closer they approach one another.” (63) It is likely that this esoteric component of religion was the real source of Gurdjieff’s knowledge. This living core of wisdom is not confined to any one spiritual tradition but is present at the heart of all of the world’s spiritual teachings:

The essence of all religions . . . is the same, affirmed Mr. Gurdjieff. Fundamentally, they are all concerned with only one thing – evolution. The teaching of each great master enables his pupils to follow a certain evolutionary path, and to arrive at a level where contact with the highest cosmic force becomes possible. At their root, all the teachings are one and the same, each having as its purpose to help us attain this possibility. (64)



It is possible that Gurdjieff connected with a living source of the perennial esoteric wisdom that lies at the heart of all of the world's spiritual traditions, yet transcends the outer forms of each teaching. This 'universal spirituality' is recognized by many historical and contemporary teachers of traditional religious paths. For instance, St. Augustine maintained that Christianity existed before the time of the historical Jesus. And Murat Yagan and other Sufi teachers (65) hold that the spiritual heart of Sufism predates and is independent of Islam: "The term 'Sufism' is often related to the mystical teachings of Islam, but it may also be understood as something which existed long before the Prophet Muhammad, something which is not limited to the religion of Islam." (66)

This universal teaching of human spiritual evolution is preserved, according to tradition, by initiates who are sometimes referred to as an 'Inner Circle of Humanity.' Gurdjieff may have discovered an esoteric school connected with the Inner Circle somewhere in the East and was there prepared for a teaching mission in the West. This would suggest that Gurdjieff did not originate his System but was acting as a transmitter of ancient knowledge adapted to the needs of the contemporary world:

It wasn't that he collected bits and pieces from the great traditions and contrived some proprietary teaching. Rather, he seems to have been able to gain access to several primary sources and to make their knowledge authentically his own. If every real teaching derives from some overarching revelation, he must also have had some centering experience or experiences that connected him to the Source, to what is central. He was returning to the source of the perennial wisdom. He called it the Great Knowledge, "the powerful ancient stream of true knowledge of being." (67)

In *Meetings with Remarkable Men* Gurdjieff speaks of a community he called the 'World Brotherhood,' which represented the universal human aspiration for spiritual truth and understanding:

Any man could enter, irrespective of the religion to which he formerly belonged . . . Among the adepts of this monastery there were former Christians, Jews, Mohammedans, Buddhists, Lamaists, and even one Shamanist. All were united by God the Truth. (68)

Whether or not the 'World Brotherhood' is a metaphor or historical reality may be irrelevant. It points to the possibility that there is an ancient universal teaching of human spiritual transformation, leading to inner freedom and liberation, that is at the heart of all religious formulations and historical manifestations: "Gurdjieff . . . regarded knowledge of reality – what he called true "knowledge of being" – as a stream flowing from remote antiquity, passed on from age to age, from people to people, from race to race." (69) The ultimate source of Gurdjieff's teaching may lie not in the visible footprints of history, but in the timeless universal dimension of Consciousness and Being that is the spiritual heart of each human being.

## NOTES

- (1) Boris Mouravieff *Ouspensky, Gurdjieff and Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (Chicago: Praxis Institute Press, 1997), p. 16.
- (2) Jeanne de Salzmann *The Reality of Being* (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), p. 295.
- (3) Louis Pauwels *Gurdjieff* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1975), pp. 176-177.
- (4) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 15.
- (5) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 286.
- (6) In *Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff: The Man, The Teaching, His Mission* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2014, p. 6), biographer William Patrick Patterson traces Gurdjieff's travels as he searched for the origins of the Fourth Way:

After a stay at the Giza Plateau, Gurdjieff journeyed southward following the Nile to the Temple of Edfu and into Abyssinia where he further discovered the ideas and principles of the Society of Akhaldans, an even more ancient teaching, which existed in Atlantis before its sinking and whose survivors migrated to Abyssinia. As over time elements of the teaching had dispersed northward to Babylon, the Hindu Kush, Tibet, and the Gobi desert, Gurdjieff made a second journey. These elements he integrated into the original Egyptian-Christian teaching and reassembled and reformulated this sacred esoteric teaching of self-development for our time

- (7) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 286.
- (8) In his essay "Who is Mr. Gurdjieff" (*Spiritual Survival in a Radically Changing World-Time* Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2009), p. 276), William Patrick Patterson argues against the proposition that Gurdjieff's teachings are derived from other spiritual traditions in the form of a compilation or synthesis:

Critics point to elements of The Fourth Way being found in other teachings, but cannot the same be said of all teachings? That one can find in The Fourth Way elements of other teachings does not mean, let alone prove, that the teaching is simply a synthesis. One could turn the argument just as easily, arguing that the elements found in, say, Christianity are the remains of the ancient Fourth Way teaching as it was wholly given. Gurdjieff is quite clear that the teaching he brings is different and in no way a derivative.

- (9) Yannis Toussulis *Sufism and the Way of Blame* (Wheaton, Illinois: Theosophical Publishing House, 2010), p. 51.
- (10) Franklin D. Lewis *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West* (Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications, 2003), p. 513.
- (11) James Webb *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Works of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and Their Followers* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), p. 540.
- (12) While Gurdjieff's psychological ideas are similar to those found in many Eastern and Western spiritual traditions, many of his cosmological ideas cannot be readily identified in other traditional teachings. Although certain aspects of his cosmology appear in the works of Plato, Pythagoras, the Gnostics and Western occult teachings, there are others for which researchers have been unable to find sources or correspondences anywhere in metaphysical and spiritual literature.
- (13) John G. Bennett *Gurdjieff: A Very Great Enigma* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1973), pp. 1-2.
- (14) Jacob Needleman "Introduction" in Jacob Needleman (ed.) *The Inner Journey: Views from the Gurdjieff Work* (Sandpoint, Idaho: Morning Light Press, 2008), p. xxvii.
- (15) Michael Pittman *Classical Spirituality in Contemporary America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp. 9-10.
- (16) Boris Mouravieff *Ouspensky, Gurdjieff and Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (Chicago: Praxis Institute Press, 1997), p. 16.
- (17) Fourth Way student Joseph Azize observes that both Gurdjieff and Jesus expressed similar ideas and were both authentic teachers in the same sacred tradition – esoteric Christianity: "In *The Gospel of Thomas* there are numerous sayings which point to Jesus having taught a spiritual teaching reminiscent of many true traditions, including Gurdjieff's." In his essay "Gurdjieff and the Jesus Legend," Azize asserts that Gurdjieff's knowledge of Jesus' life and teachings surpasses that of historical and contemporary Christian clergy (in David Kherdian (ed.) *A Stopinder Anthology* Mount Desert, Maine: Beech Hill Publishing, 2014, pp. 90-91):

We will never know how Gurdjieff knew what he did about Christianity. But it seems that he knew whereof he spoke when he said of his own ideas and practices: "If you like, this is esoteric Christianity." Considered as a whole, Gurdjieff made four cardinal assertions about Jesus. First, that almost everything we believe we know about Jesus is wrong. In particular, the Gospels are not entirely trustworthy documents. We cannot profit from them, such as they are, because we do not know how

to read them. Second, Jesus was a genuine “Messenger from OUR END-LESSNESS.” Third, his teaching – like that of all divine teachers – was taught by a method specially adapted by him for the people amongst whom, and the circumstances in which, he was “actualized.” Fourth, Jesus’s teaching has been distorted time and again by those who claim to be upholding it, and so it has not come down to us in its integrity. It seems to me that one could only make such statements from the position that he understands Jesus and his teaching better than anyone else, and especially better than the Christian churches.

- (18) P.D. Ouspensky, A.R. Orage and Maurice Nicoll were well-versed in Christian teachings. Maurice Nicoll provides an insightful analysis of the esoteric and psychological meaning of the Gospels from a Gurdjieffian perspective in *The New Man: An Interpretation of Some Parables and Miracles of Christ* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1973).
- (19) Robin Amis “MouraviEFF and the Secret of the Source” *Gnosis Magazine* Summer 1991, p. 47.
- (20) William Patrick Patterson *Spiritual Survival in a Radically Changing World-Time* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2009), p. 277.
- (21) According to historical sources, the Essene Brotherhood was founded 1200 years before the birth of Christ and flourished between 200 BCE and 200 CE. The Brotherhood was located in isolated communities near the Dead Sea and practised asceticism, held property in common and sought mystical communion with God. Gurdjieff believed that the Essenes preserved very ancient wisdom, and were able to influence the growth of plants through music. Some of Gurdjieff’s sacred dances are said to be derived from the Essenes.
- (22) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 102.
- (23) William Patrick Patterson *Taking With the Left Hand* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 1996), pp. 74-75.
- (24) William Patrick Patterson *Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff: The Man, The Teaching, His Mission* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2014), p. 522.
- (25) The modern symbolic approach to the study of ancient Egyptian history was pioneered by scholar R.A. Schwaller de Lubicz in his major work *The Temple of Man*. John Anthony West carefully studied the writings of de Lubicz and concluded that Egyptian civilization was much older than commonly believed and that the historical Egypt was predated by a much earlier civilization that was the source of later developments.

In *Meetings with Remarkable Men* Gurdjieff related that he found a map of “pre-sand Egypt” that amazed and astonished him. Some have speculated that the map may have included the Sphinx, which conventional scholars believe was carved around 2500 BCE. However, some researchers such as Robert Schoch argue that the Sphinx is much older, perhaps dating from 7500 BCE or even earlier, at a time when Egypt had a much wetter climate and was lush with vegetation.

Fourth Way author William Patterson postulates that Gurdjieff’s teachings can be traced to prehistoric Egypt, where it was transmitted from Abyssinia (Ethiopia). He further speculates that the original source was mythical Atlantis and that after a cataclysmic flood inundated their island home, the survivors migrated to Central Africa and eventually Egypt where the teaching was formulated and expressed as ‘esoteric Christianity’ predating the birth of Christ. This is consistent with the version of ancient history related by Gurdjieff in *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson*. He writes that following a great natural disaster that sank the island of Atlantis, the surviving members of an esoteric Atlantean society, known as the ‘Akhdans,’ migrated to Egypt where they ushered in a new spiritually-based civilization.

- (26) G.I. Gurdjieff *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson: An Objectively Impartial Criticism of the Life of Man* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950), p. 1009.
- (27) G.I. Gurdjieff *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 227.
- (28) Anna Challenger *Philosophy and Art in Gurdjieff’s Beelzebub* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2002), pp. 29-30.
- (29) John G. Bennett *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 135.
- (30) In *The Teachers of Gurdjieff* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1973, pp. 56-57), Rafael Lefort explains the importance of interacting with a teacher in the process of spiritual development:

The teacher transmits to the pupil the baraka he himself receives from his own master. This baraka works on the pupil according to the time, place and need and the circumstances in which he finds himself. If the baraka is to produce a specific effect on the person, then it is possible that the effect can only be created if the person is in a certain geographical region and in a certain time relationship with the teaching.

- (31) In *Gurdjieff: A Very Great Enigma* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1973, pp. 70-71), John G. Bennett argues that Gurdjieff’s enigmatic behavior is consistent with the ‘way of blame’ of the Malamati tradition of Sufis. By using the methods of the Malamati, Gurdjieff attempted to hide his true nature and the source of his teachings:

There is one other characteristic of Gurdjieff that I must refer to, and that is, his adoption of a deliberate disguise in the form of putting himself in a bad light. He put on a mask that would tend to put people off, rather than draw them towards him. Now, this method – which is called by the Sufis, ‘the Way of Malamat,’ or the methods of Blame – was highly esteemed in old times among the Sufis, who regarded the Sheikhs or Pirs who went by the Way of Blame, as particularly eminent in spirituality. Such people represented themselves to the outside world in a bad light, partly in order to avoid attracting praise and admiration towards themselves, and also partly as a personal protection. This way of Malamat has been lost to sight in modern times.

- (32) Anna Challenger *Philosophy and Art in Gurdjieff's Beelzebub* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2002), p. 14.
- (33) In the 1920s at the Prieuré, new students were often assigned to kitchen duties, a practice similar to classic Mevlevi Sufi training, in which the aspirant engages in community service as a preliminary stage of their spiritual development.
- (34) Scholars have noted that some of the music collaboratively created by Gurdjieff and Thomas de Hartmann reflect Sufi influences (Michael Pittman *Classical Spirituality in Contemporary America* New York: Bloomsbury, 2012, p. 25):

In addition to a range of works that reflect influence or allusion with a range of Eastern, Greek, and Christian traditions, significant weight is given historically to the music that was inspired by, or copied from Sufi sources. Indications of this influence can be found in titles of some of his works, including the dances and chants of the Sayyids, “Dervish Dance,” and the music for Gurdjieff’s movements including “Dervish #7,” “Ho-Ya Dervish,” “Camel Dervish,” and others which are based on the enneagram and some movements which include gestures from the Mevlevi Sena, or turning ceremony.

- (35) Anna Challenger argues in *Philosophy and Art in Gurdjieff's Beelzebub* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2002, pp. 13-14) that:

As Gurdjieff cites the Mevlevi order as a source of his sacred gymnastics, his purposes in teaching dance must have coincided with those of the Whirling Dervishes. In fact, P.D. Ouspensky records that he and Gurdjieff once attended a performance of the Mevlevi in Constantinople and that Gurdjieff took the occasion to explain how the whirling of the dervishes is, among other things, a demanding mental exercise based on a complicated number system, like the movements he had taught Ouspensky and others.

- (36) Mohammad Tamdgidi in his PhD dissertation *Mysticism and Utopia: Towards the Sociology of Self-Knowledge and Human Architecture (A Study in Marx, Gurdjieff*

*and Mannheim*) argues that the word ‘Sarmoung’ is an encrypted secret code that can be deciphered by the Sufi system of alphabetical numerology whereby each component of the Arabic/Persian alphabets is associated with numerical values. For instance, substituting the numerical equivalents for the letters S, R, M, U and N (60, 200, 40, 6 and 50) produces three associated numbers – 300, 50 and 6. When These numbers are translated back to their associated alphabets they yield the letters SH, N and U which in various combinations point to concealed meanings in the original word ‘Sarmoung.’ For example, NUSH = sweet as honey, an allusion to the bee, an ancient symbol of collecting and preserving esoteric knowledge. The various hidden meanings that Tamdgidi uncovered in the word ‘Sarmoung’ are all associated with aspects of Gurdjieff’s teaching enterprise in the West. Excerpts from his dissertation can be found at [www.Gurdjieff-Bibliography.com](http://www.Gurdjieff-Bibliography.com).

- (37) In *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971, p. 18), Gurdjieff characterizes the teaching tales of the East as “sacred writings” which exert a spiritual influence on the reader or listener:

These texts – and I speak particularly of the *Thousand and One Nights* – are works of literature in the full sense of the word. Anyone reading or hearing this book feels clearly that everything in it is a fantasy, but fantasy corresponding to truth, even though composed of episodes which are quite improbable for the ordinary life of people.

- (38) In *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, Gurdjieff makes a number of references to dervishes and their teaching practices and ideas. Professor Michael Pittman cautions that these are symbolic rather than historically factual (*Classical Spirituality in Contemporary America* New York: Bloomsbury, 2012, pp. 35-36):

Though references are made to dervishes, discourses by dervishes, rituals and locations associated with so-called dervishes, they remain largely elusive and symbolic. Though he likely made connections with dervishes in his search of Asia, these references, at least in the context of his narrative, primarily serve the purpose of Gurdjieff’s evocative, dialogic mode discourse about spiritual transformation . . . Thus we find, with *Meetings* in particular, that Gurdjieff employed references to Islam in a very general way, and the references to specific Sufi traditions and practices remain largely indefinite and allusive. Despite the apparent indefiniteness with which he treats them, he does take strides to present these figures, traditions, and teachings as sources of authentic and, moreover, advanced knowledge. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that Gurdjieff attempts to mediate his discourses on the soul with his depictions of Sufi and other esoteric topics, to the particular audience at the time and place of his writings.

- (39) In *The People of the Secret* (London: Octagon Press, 1983, p. 166), Ernest Scott claims that Beelzebub is the anglicized equivalent of *B’il Sahab*, which is Arabic for “the man with a motive or aim.”

(40) Ernest Scott *The People of the Secret* (London: Octagon Press, 1983), pp.166-67.

(41) Anna Challenger *Philosophy and Art in Gurdjieff's Beelzebub* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2002), p. 26.

(42) Nasrudin's role of the 'wise fool' calls to mind Gurdjieff's conscious role-playing and unconventional behaviour with his students, which is similar to that of teachers who follow the 'Path of Blame' in order to illustrate common human patterns of mechanical and conditioned behaviour.

(43) Professor Michael Pittman cautions that Gurdjieff's use of Mullah Nassr Eddin in *Beelzebub's Tales* does not necessarily support the contention that his teachings were directly derived from Sufism (*Classical Spirituality in Contemporary America* New York: Bloomsbury, 2012, p. 88):

One of the most forceful arguments against an explicit Sufi connection and the Mullah, is that most, if not all, of the stories of the Mullah that appear in *Beelzebub's Tales* have likely been devised by Gurdjieff himself. This is not to say that the stories of Nasrudin are not used in a serious teaching context where they are understood to have different levels of meaning. In fact, they are . . . Gurdjieff borrows the model, or form, but not necessarily its content, and he does so to serve, as with other Sufi elements in *Beelzebub's Tales*, his own specific aims. This does not discount the possibility for understanding Gurdjieff's work in terms of Sufi discourse, with stories containing multiple layers of meaning. However, a viable interpretation needs to account for similarities and differences; for it is in both that we find the uniqueness of Gurdjieff's discourse.

(44) In the 1950s, following Gurdjieff's death, Bennett travelled extensively in the Near and Middle East. In *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973, p. 79) he describes his contacts with Naqshbandi Sufi schools:

I met several schools of the Naq'shbandi dervishes and found that organization and methods corresponded to a remarkable degree with Gurdjieff's description. The Naq'shbandis are known to be the successors of the Khwajagan and they are similarly engaged in practical undertakings for the good of society. This is said to be a mark of a Fourth Way school. They also attach importance to balanced development of all sides of man's nature.

(45) Idries Shah sought out English followers of Gurdjieff, most notably John G. Bennett, in the 1960s and tried to convince them that Gurdjieff's teachings were incomplete and largely derived from the Naqshbandi school of Sufism. He published a number of important books on Sufism in the ensuing decades, which were generally well-received by both academics and the general public. He brought popular attention



to the tales of Mulla Nasrudin in the 1960s and 1970s with his collections of stories about the Mulla as a Sufi teaching figure who humorously illustrated the foibles of human nature. See his *The Pleasantries of the Incredible Mulla Nasrudin*, *The Exploits of the Incomparable Mulla Nasrudin* and *The Subtleties of the Inimitable Mulla Nasrudin*.

- (46) According to tradition, the School called the Khwajagan (‘Masters of Wisdom’) was the original source of esoteric teaching dating from remote antiquity before the ‘Flood.’ In *The Masters of Wisdom*, John G. Bennett proposes that the Khwajagan were the forerunners of the Naqshbandi Sufi tradition and may have been linked to the Sarmoung Brotherhood.
- (47) Murat Yagan *The Teachings of Kebzeh* (Vernon, B.C.: Kebzeh Publications, 1995) p. 11.
- (48) Idries Shah *The Way of the Sufi* (London: Octagon Press, 1984), p. 40.
- (49) Ernest Scott elaborates on this point in *The People of the Secret* (London: Octagon Press, 1983, p. 168):
- The Sufis in Afghanistan are closely connected with these People, but no one will tell an outsider anything more than that these monasteries exist. They say that the only outsider to have penetrated into the outer ring of monasteries was a Russian-Greek, George Gurdjieff, whose contacts enabled him to be accepted as a pupil . . . Said to have been trained by Bahaud-din Nakshband, one of the “outer masters”, Gurdjieff mastered some of the teachings and tried to teach them in the West.
- (50) Max Gorman *Stairway to the Stars: Sufism, Gurdjieff and the Inner Tradition of Mankind* (London: Aeon Books, 2010), p. 71.
- (51) William Patrick Patterson *Spiritual Survival in a Radically Changing World-Time* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2009), p. 288.
- (52) William Patrick Patterson *Spiritual Survival in a Radically Changing World-Time* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2009), p. 288.
- (53) James Webb *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Works of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and Their Followers* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), p. 529.
- (54) James Webb *The Harmonious Circle: The Lives and Works of G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and Their Followers* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), p. 530.
- (55) Ravi Ravindra discusses some of the evidence for this influence in “Gurdjieff Work and the Teaching of Krishna” in Jacob Needleman and George Baker (eds.) *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and his Teachings* (New York: Continuum, 1996, pp. 214-215):

Gurdjieff travelled widely and may have been influenced by the various strands of the vast Indian tradition, either directly or indirectly, through Tibet and other parts of Asia. He refers to India on many occasions in his writings, often with the suggestion that in ancient times, if not now, esoteric schools with real knowledge had existed there. He even referred to himself as a 'Hindu' in his first public pronouncements in a Moscow newspaper in 1914 regarding the performance of 'an Indian mystery play' called *The Struggle of the Magicians*. This particular instance may not be anything more than a useful role-playing, but there is no doubt that he was very knowledgeable about Indian traditions and often mercilessly critical of their exaggerations and of the many fads derived from India current in the occult and spiritual circles of his day.

(56) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 286.

(57) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 287.

(58) Idries Shah makes this point in *The Commanding Self* (London: Octagon Press, 1994, p. 286.):

The Enneagon, or nine-pointed figure, is by no means unknown in 'occult' circles in the West. I remember a drawing of it from a manuscript in the Library of Grenoble, for instance . . . It came to Europe with the Kabbala, based on the quite well-known mathematical work of the ancient Arab philosopher Ibn el-Laith, and this fact is mentioned in the *Legacy of Islam*, in the chapter of mathematics. It was thus by no means unknown in medieval circles.

(59) Merrily E. Taylor, ed. *Remembering Pyotr Demianovich Ouspensky* (New Haven: Yale University Library, 1978), pp. 31-32.

(60) Frank Sinclair *Of the Life Aligned* (U.S.A.: Xlibris, 2009), p. 45.

(61) Ravi Ravindra discusses the universal nature of Gurdjieff's teachings in "Gurdjieff Work and the Teaching of Krishna" in Jacob Needleman and George Baker, eds. *Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and his Teachings* (New York: Continuum, 1996, p. 216):

Gurdjieff was a traditionalist, although from all accounts a very untraditional one, in the sense that he had enormous respect for the traditions and believed that all the major traditions once carried a kernel of truth which has, in general, been lost and which may be recovered from the fragments which have been preserved in the sacred texts and ceremonies of many religions. He

referred to his Work as “esoteric Christianity,” but one feels that, in other contexts, he might have called it “esoteric Buddhism” or “esoteric Islam” as well.

- (62) Tcheslaw Tchekhovitch *Gurdjieff: A Master in Life* (Toronto: Dolmen Meadows Editions, 2006), p. 45.
- (63) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 285.
- (64) Tcheslaw Tchekhovitch *Gurdjieff: A Master in Life* (Toronto: Dolmen Meadows Editions, 2006), p. 43.
- (65) Sufis have sometimes been called “esoteric Christians” because they regard Jesus as a hierophant and teacher of the Way, recognized by some as the “greatest Sufi.” The Sufi master Hakim Jami declared that Sufism transcended Islam and that Hermes, Pythagoras, Plato and Hippocrates represented an unbroken line of Sufic transmission. Mohammed himself revered Abraham, Moses and Jesus as great teachers of the same monotheistic religion that he revealed. In *A Perfumed Scorpion* (London: Octagon Press, 1983, p. 159), Idries Shah suggests that Sufism, in its fullest sense, is the “flower” or inner dimension of all religions, compatible with Islam but also existing independently of the prophetic tradition:

Sufism has been known under many names, to all peoples, from the beginning of human times . . . it was transmitted by the Prophet Mohammed as the inner component of all religion . . . it also persisted side by side with the Prophetic transmission, as, for instance, in the independent witness of the historical figure of Uways al-Qarni, a contemporary of the Prophet who, however, never met him.

However, Islamic traditionalists dispute the contention that Sufism is a universal spirituality that predates Islam. They do not believe that mysticism can take non-religious forms and hold that Sufism is a strictly Islamic religious path expressed through traditional Sufi Orders.

- (66) Murat Yagan “Sufism and the Source” *Gnosis Magazine* Fall, 1994, p. 41.
- (67) Frank Sinclair *Of the Life Aligned* (U.S.A.: Xlibris, 2009), p. 12.
- (68) G.I. Gurdjieff *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 239.
- (69) Jeanne de Salzmann *The Reality of Being* (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), p. xii.